AN ORCHARD PRINCESS

By

RALPH HENRY BARBOUR

A. L. Bouton

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SHE LET THE HAND WITH THE BRUSH FALL DEJECTEDLY

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RALPH HENRY BARBOUR

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TO

M. L. B.

"The gold of the April sunshine,
The sweet of the April breeze,
The bluebird's note in yonder wood,
The droning of the bees;
The far hills' distant outline—
All tender blues and grays—
The April joy of the blossoming world,
And the charm of April days."

ELEANOR C. HULL.

ILLUSTRATIONS

AN ORCHARD PRINCESS

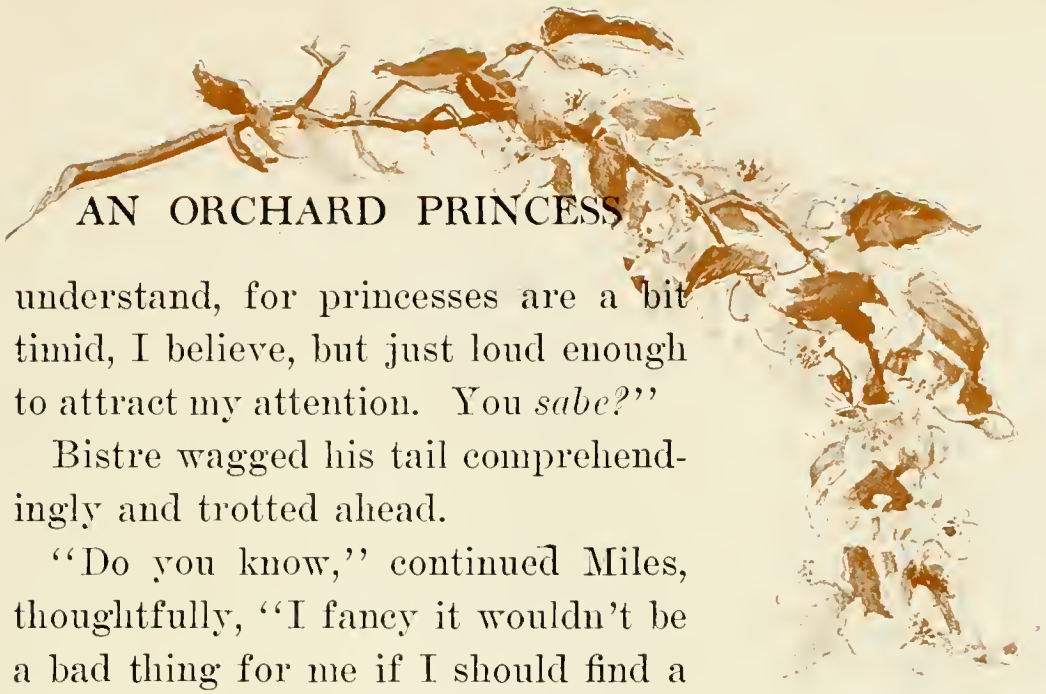
I

As Miles Fallon left the cottage, loitered down the red brick walk, moist with the morning dew, and stepped into the road, he looked undecidedly east and west. Eastward was civilization—and the Misses Ruggles puttering about their little garden; westward lay a deserted country road bright with sunlight and spring greenery. Miles turned westward. So did Bistre.

Bistre was a ferocious-looking white

bull-dog with a brown spot over half his face and a tail which, although but a scant two inches long, could be at times remarkably expressive. This was one of the times. Trotting along at the man's side, Bistre threatened to wag that ridiculous stump out of existence.

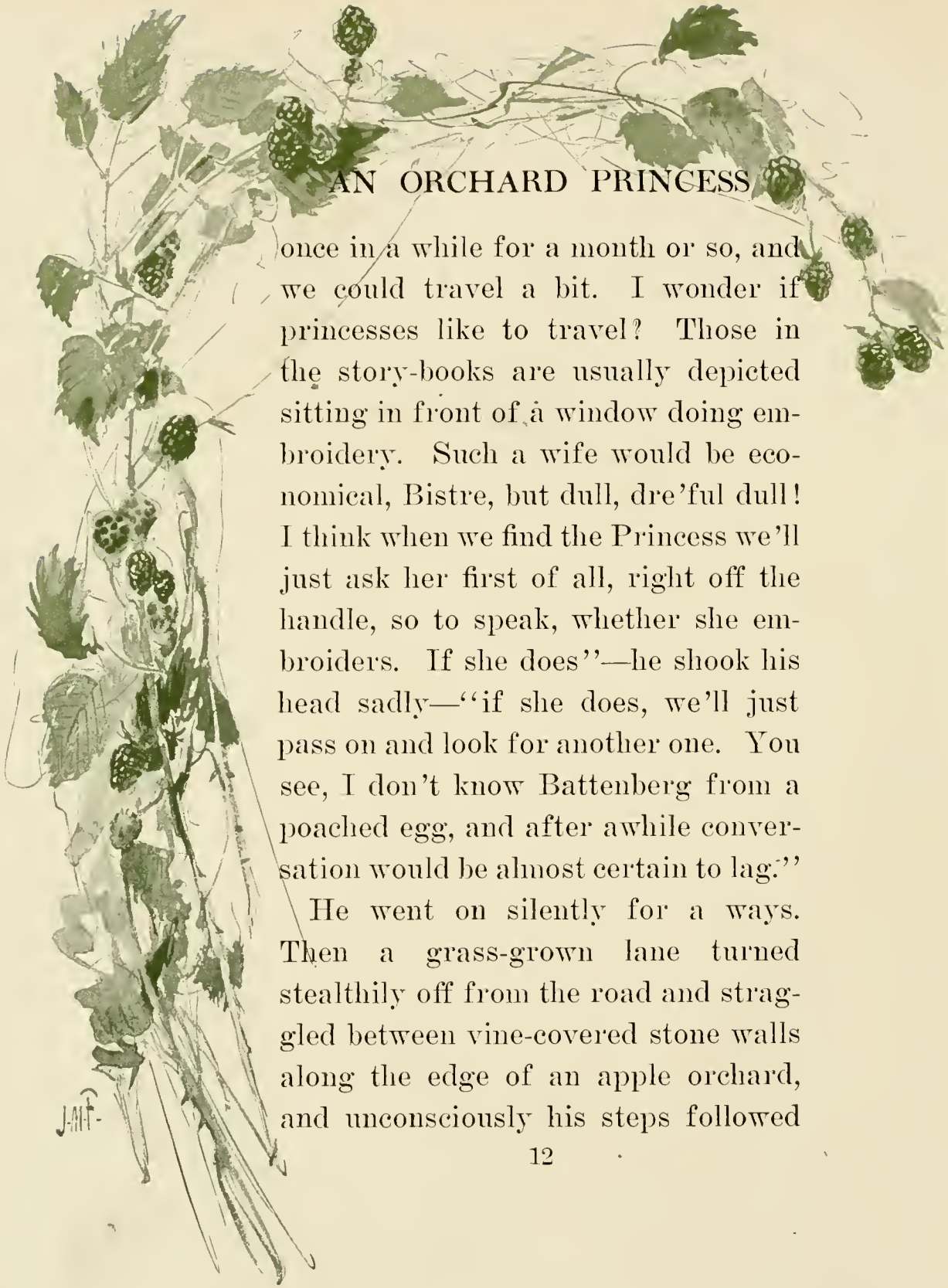
"That's all right," said Miles, soothingly. "Please don't forget in your enthusiasm that we are seeking adventure, you and I. Kindly bear in mind the fact that I am mounted upon my milk-white charger and, with lance in rest, am caracoling along the highway in search of an imprisoned princess. As you're not particularly imaginative, perhaps you'd better remain just a dog, though I *had* thought of having you for a squire. And, look here, Bistre, if you see the Princess and I don't, you must bark; not too fiercely, you



understand, for princesses are a bit timid, I believe, but just loud enough to attract my attention. You *sabe?*"

Bistre wagged his tail comprehendingly and trotted ahead.

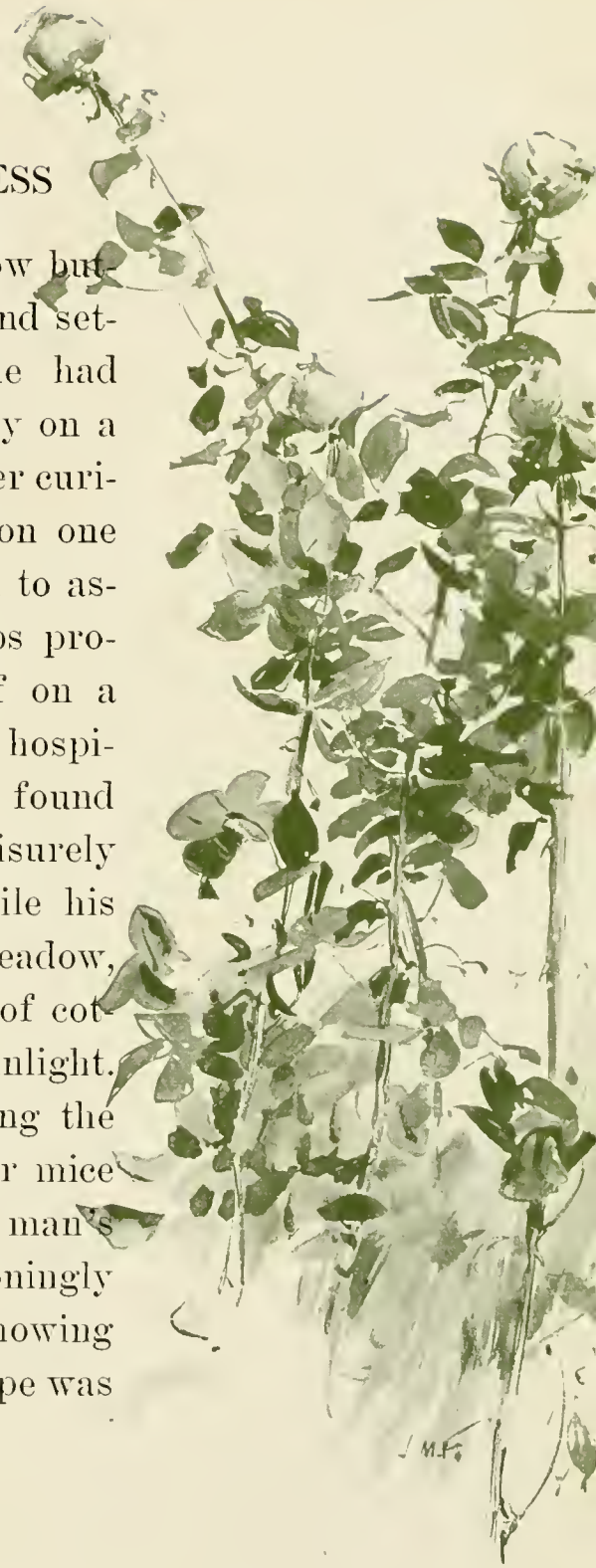
"Do you know," continued Miles, thoughtfully, "I fancy it wouldn't be a bad thing for me if I should find a princess? There's no doubt but that I ought to marry and settle down. It's really time. The first thing I know I'll have gray hairs and a high, thoughtful forehead, and then even the scullery maid, to say nothing of the Princess, won't cast a look at me. I can afford to marry, too; I haven't that excuse any longer. But, of course, the Princess mustn't have too expensive tastes; a comfortable house outside of town, now, with a horse or two, or a 'bubble,' would be quite within our means. We could go up to the city



once in a while for a month or so, and we could travel a bit. I wonder if princesses like to travel? Those in the story-books are usually depicted sitting in front of a window doing embroidery. Such a wife would be economical, Bistre, but dull, dre'ful dull! I think when we find the Princess we'll just ask her first of all, right off the handle, so to speak, whether she embroiders. If she does''—he shook his head sadly—''if she does, we'll just pass on and look for another one. You see, I don't know Battenberg from a poached egg, and after awhile conversation would be almost certain to lag.''

He went on silently for a ways. Then a grass-grown lane turned stealthily off from the road and straggled between vine-covered stone walls along the edge of an apple orchard, and unconsciously his steps followed

Bistre's. A cloud of tiny yellow butterflies arose in front of him and settled to earth again when he had passed. A bluebird sang lustily on a nearby tree, observing the passer curiously with head held perkily on one side. Presently the lane began to ascend the hill, and Miles's limbs protested lazily. Seating himself on a wall where the top stones had hospitably fallen into the orchard, he found his pipe and pouch and began leisurely to fill the blackened bowl, while his gaze wandered idly over the meadow, the curving road, and the line of cottages basking in the morning sunlight. Bistre, after nosing about along the walls in half-hearted search for mice or squirrels, sank down at the man's feet and observed him questioningly with the tip of his pink tongue showing between his teeth. When the pipe was



lighted, Miles took a knee into his hands and continued the one-sided conversation.

"There might be little princes and princesses, too," he said. "I should like that, Bistre. I believe I am naturally domestic. To be sure, it never occurred to me before, but there's something about—the air—the—the—Hang it, I don't know what it is! But whatever it is, old chap, it has set me thinking along unusual lines; thinking, in fact, of subjects which I am not certain it is proper for a bachelor to consider. I wonder if you ever felt the way I do this morning? Did you ever think, Bistre, that you'd like to have a home and a wife and children and —and a Tabby cat? There, don't get excited! There's no cat around here; I just mentioned a supposititious one. What are you looking so cynical

about? I know; you've had a wife and children, you rascal! Where are they? How comes it you're gallivanting around up here in the rôle of a bachelor? Bistre, I fear you're a gay dog! There's a look—an expression——"

Miles shook his head disapprovingly. Bistre, aroused from his lethargy by the mention of "cat," scrambled heavily over the wall and wandered away amongst the trees. Once he had encountered a cat in an apple-tree; the recollection brought a sparkle of pleasure to his brown eyes; there was no harm in having a look; you never could tell about cats!

Presently Miles, lost in his thoughts, heard a low growl. He took his pipe from his mouth, his knee from his hands, and looked around. Bistre was not in sight. In the act of returning the pipe again he heard a louder growl

from behind him, a growl that was half a bark and half a throaty gurgle,—a growl plainly meant to convey a warning. Miles turned again.

"Wonder what the silly beast has found?" he muttered. "Perhaps—why, of course, it's the Princess!"

Smiling whimsically, he lowered himself cautiously over the wall and bent so that he could look under the low-hanging clusters of pink blossoms. A dozen yards away stood the dog, his head turned questioningly toward the man and his ridiculous stump wagging excitedly. Miles crept toward him. As he went, dodging the sprays of bloom, into the deep droning of the bees and the chattering of the birds crept a new note, the musical tinkling of running water. The ground sloped before him, and when he stood at Bistre's side he found himself looking

down into a little glade through which a tiny brook tumbled. Beyond it the orchard began again; but here was an unplanted space of lush grass and forget-me-nots and violets and—and——

Miles turned wonderingly to the dog.

"The Princess!" he whispered.

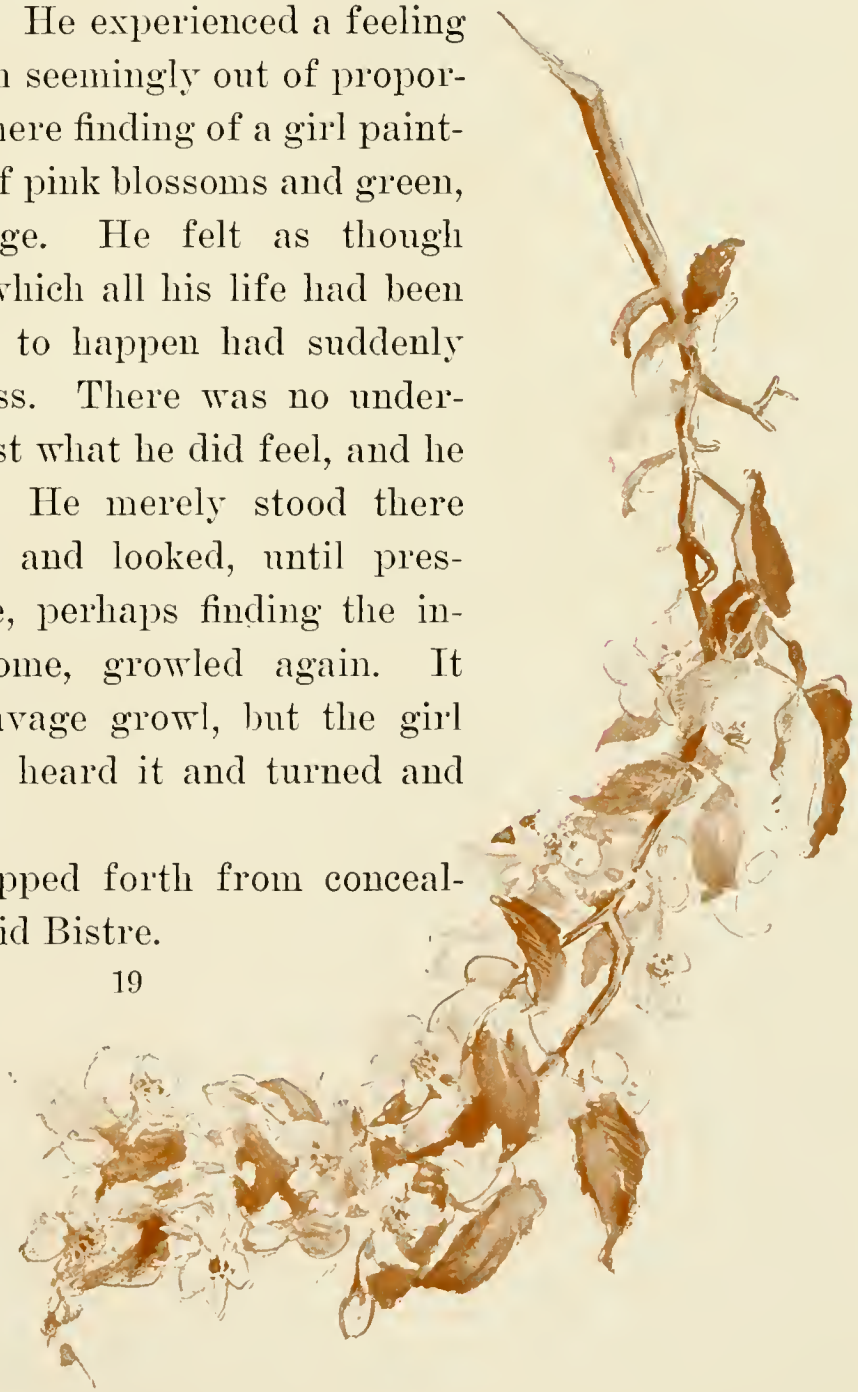
Bistre wagged his tail in a way which said as plainly as you like, "Of course; who else?"

At a little distance, just beyond the blossom-laden branches of an apple-tree, stood an easel, from the top of which hung a blue sun-bonnet. On the easel was a canvas, a confused blur of pink and green. Before the canvas, brush in hand, sat a girl. The shadows had travelled eastward since she had placed her stool, and a flood of sunlight was upon her, tingeing her white

gown with warm tones, dyeing her cheek with a deeper pink, and adding new glory to the gold of her hair. From where Miles stood and silently gazed his fill the girl's face was silhouetted softly against the shadowed greenery beyond. She was quite young,—perhaps twenty-one or two,—slender, radiant with youth and health, and beautiful beyond any pictured princess of Miles's acquaintance. She wore a white skirt and waist, and a blue painting apron was thrown across her lap as she sat. Once while he looked she let the hand with the brush fall dejectedly and gazed for a moment at the canvas before her; he could see the little frown creep across the white forehead. Then the brush sought the vivid palette again, the golden head bent toward the easel, and the work went on.

"A princess indeed!" thought Miles. "A princess with hair like the gold of sunlight and cheeks like the blossoms above her! An Orchard Princess!" He experienced a feeling of exultation seemingly out of proportion to the mere finding of a girl painting a view of pink blossoms and green, sunlit foliage. He felt as though something which all his life had been foredoomed to happen had suddenly come to pass. There was no understanding just what he did feel, and he didn't try. He merely stood there and looked and looked, until presently Bistre, perhaps finding the inaction irksome, growled again. It wasn't a savage growl, but the girl at the easel heard it and turned and saw them.

Miles stepped forth from concealment. So did Bistre.



II

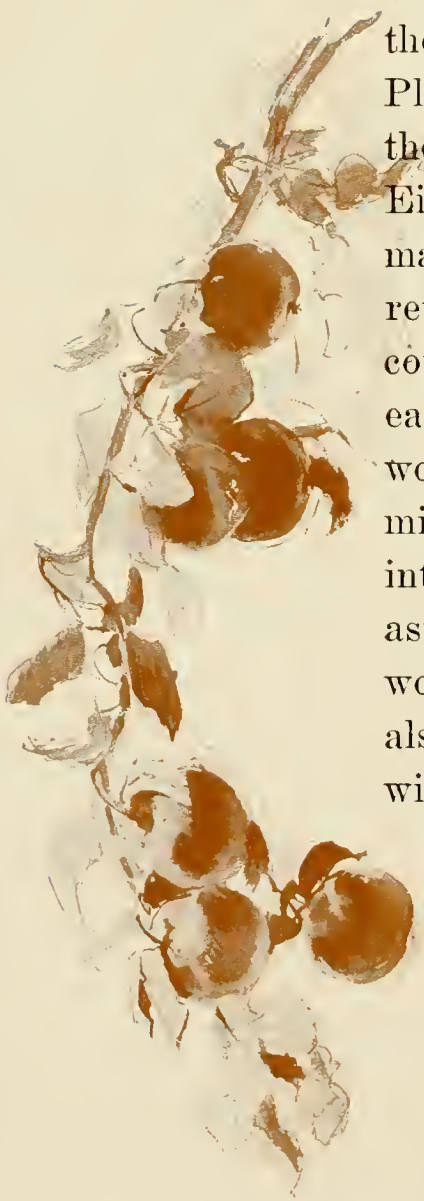
In spite of the fact that Miles Fallon had spent many of his thirty-one years in running about the country, he had received an average education. That is, he had struggled through college,—"without," as he said, "having been branded A.B. or A.M.,"—and had subsequently taken a brief post-graduate course in what he called "Society 1." Subsequently, and perhaps as a protest against what he learned in that course, he went to Arizona and mingled with the alkali and adobe. Besides supplying him with material for the novels which had made him well known, his years in the West and

Southwest had been rather more educational than his college life. But—and he realized the fact with regret—neither his college, social, nor Western education had prepared him for an emergency such as the present one. None of his courses had instructed him as to the proper words with which to address a strange young lady discovered painting a landscape under an apple-tree!

However, there was nothing to be gained by railing at the deficiencies of his education. Having removed his cap as a preliminary, he sought confusedly about in his mind for words. And he found them at last!

"I hope we have not alarmed you?"

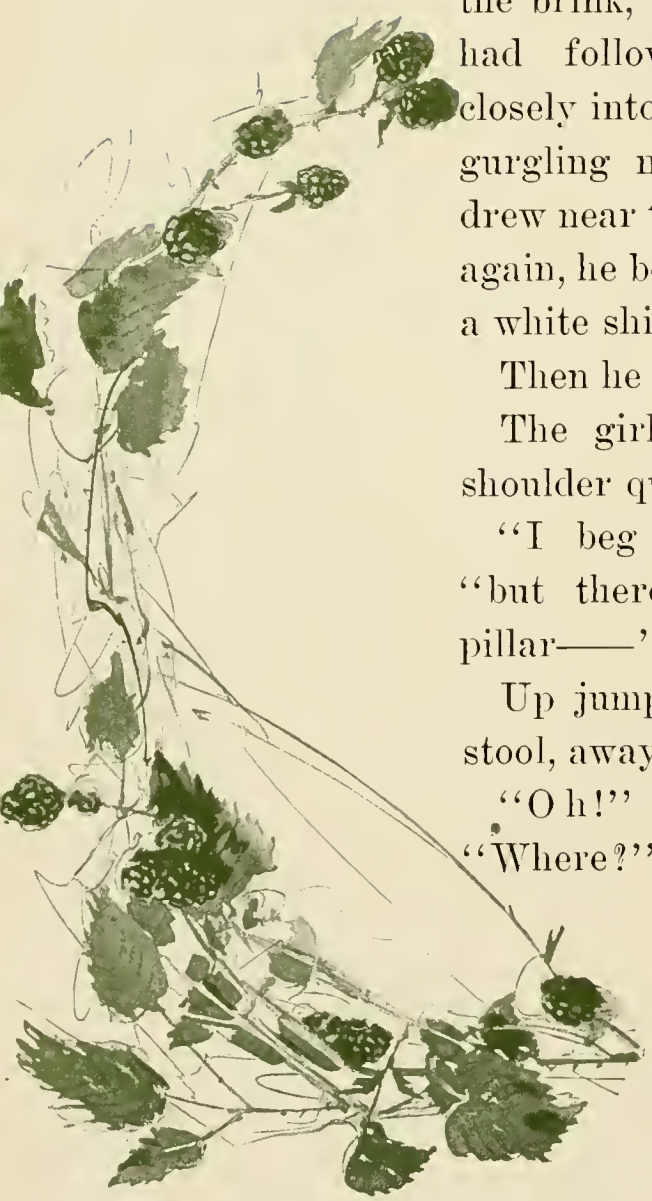
That was what he was going to say. But he never said it. For, just as he had composed his features into a proper expression of courteous con-



cern and had opened his mouth to emit the brilliant remark, he observed that the girl had turned her head away and was once more unconcernedly painting! By that time, at least two precious seconds having elapsed, he was but twenty feet away from her, and the psychological moment had passed. Plainly they had *not* alarmed her; therefore to ask would be nonsensical. Either he must think of another remark, and that quickly, or he must retreat. If he kept on in his present course he would run straight into the easel and upset it; and while that would undoubtedly "break the ice," it might not prove the happiest sort of introduction! Weakly he swerved aside and proceeded on a course which would take him behind her. It would also take him to the brook, and he saw with misgiving that the ground on

either side of the little stream was wet and marshy. He would cut a sorry figure indeed as he went floundering up to his ankles in water. But to turn back was not to be thought of; better to perish, to drown miserably before her eyes, than to retrace his steps and virtually confess that he had been spying on her. He went heroically on. Bistre heroically followed.

And then, at the last moment, with one foot *squishing* down into a clump of forget-me-nots, he turned and stole a glance at the girl—and knew he was saved! Her back was toward him, but something—perhaps the half-hearted way in which she dabbed a brush onto a region of the palette where there was no paint, perhaps the strained set of her bent head—told him that she was not so indifferent to his fate as she would have it appear;



that, in short, she was waiting, with what emotions he could not tell, to hear his feet floundering in the grassy morass. But he saw more than the girl's back, and he drew away from the brink, stumbled over Bistre, who had followed him faithfully and closely into danger, and, with one foot gurgling musically in its wet shoe, drew near the girl. Taking off his cap again, he bowed politely to the back of a white shirt-waist.

Then he coughed apologetically.

The girl looked around over her shoulder quite calmly.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but there's a large green caterpillar——"

Up jumped the girl, over went the stool, away went the brush.

"O h!" s h e c r i e d, f a i n t l y. "Where?"

"Viewed transversely, about in the centre of your back," replied Miles.

"Oh!" It was a shuddering exclamation this time, and it went to his heart. She whisked about, and—"Won't you please—please——!" she stammered.

He stepped gallantly to the rescue, secured the enemy between thumb and forefinger, and tossed him into the brook. Bistre trotted after to investigate.

"Thank you," said the girl. "I—I'm so glad you saw it!"

"So am I," answered Miles, enthusiastically.

"I can't bear caterpillars," she continued, with a shudder. "They're so—so creepy!"

"They are," responded Miles. He'd have agreed to anything, I think. He rescued the brush from the inter-

ested attention of a bumble-bee, picked up the stool, and then allowed himself a look at the canvas. The girl, having deftly repaired imaginary injury to her hair and accepted the recovered paint-brush, shot little curious glances at him.

What she saw could scarcely have been displeasing. He was tall, erect, broad of shoulder, and deep of chest. Despite the fact that it was as yet but the last week of April, his skin was tanned to a becoming shade of brown. He was a good-looking chap, although his features boasted no great regularity. Perhaps his mouth, scarcely hidden by a closely trimmed brown moustache, and his eyes, grayish blue, honest and kindly, were accountable for his attractiveness. The eyes had a whimsical twinkle within them, even when the mouth was grave, that gave

the face an expression of humor. For the rest, his short brown hair was a trifle wavy under his cloth cap, and his movements, so slow and deliberate as to almost seem lazy, could not disguise the muscular strength of the well-built body. So long he stared silently at the picture that at length she was moved to apology.

"It hasn't gone very well this morning," she said, hurriedly. "I—I am quite hopeless about it."

"Well!" He turned to her in genuine astonishment. "It seems fairly wonderful to me! It reminds me of——"

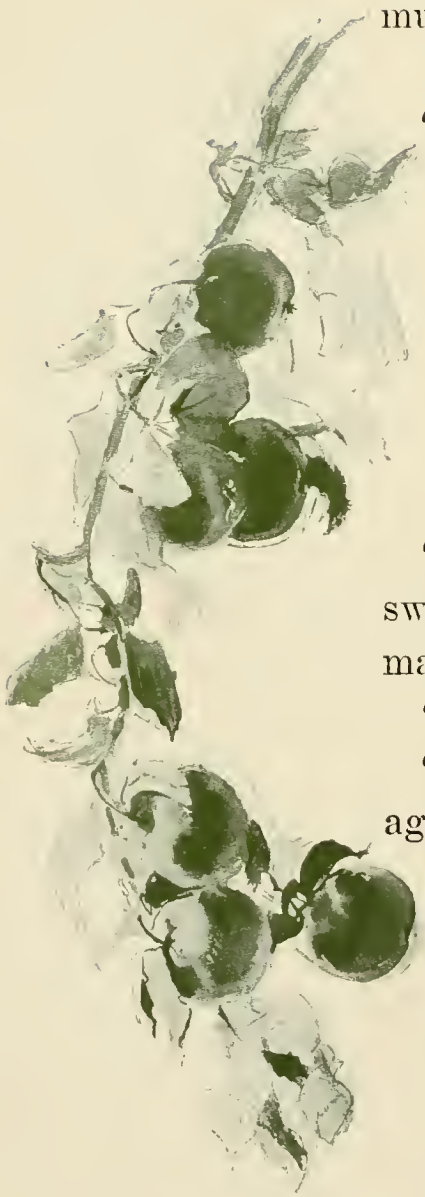
"Of what?" she asked, smilingly, as he paused.

"Of—well, just a bit of verse I read somewhere." He hadn't quoted poetry since he was a school-boy, he thought, and the idea of doing so now

embarrassed him. "It was just a little thing, but somehow it stuck; and your picture brought it back."

"Won't you tell it to me?" she asked, eagerly.

"I'm afraid it won't sound like much," he answered, "but——



"The gold of the April sunshine,
The sweet of the April breeze,
The bluebird's note in yonder wood,
The droning of the bees;
The far hills' distant outline—
All tender blues and grays-
The April joy of the blossoming world,
And the charm of April days."

"Thank you," she said. "It is very sweet. And—and my canvas really made you think of those lines?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad; you—you've encouraged me so much! I was feeling

rather out of sorts with it before you —before the caterpillar came."

"Then you owe something to the caterpillar after all. I doubt if he really deserved his banishment."

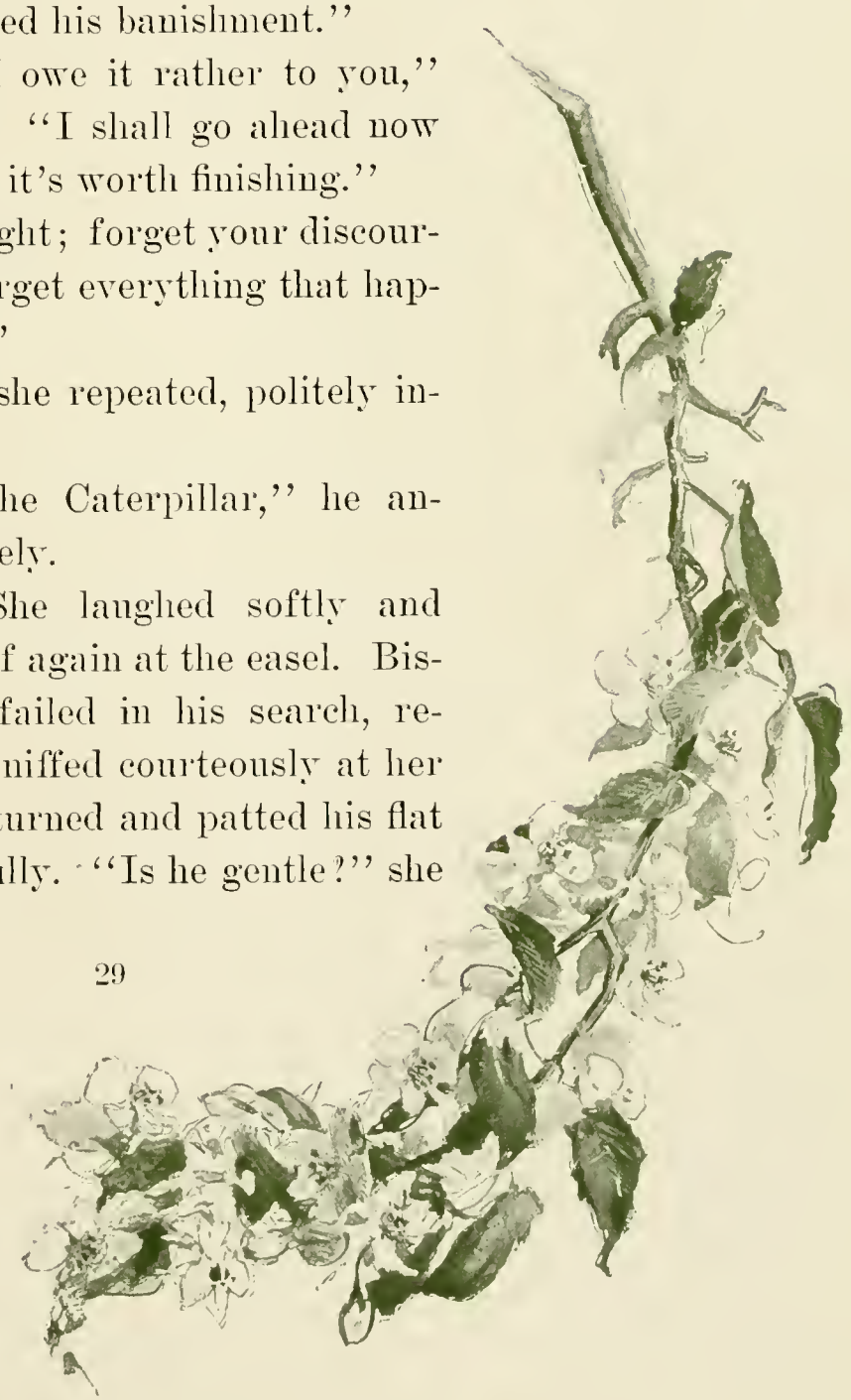
"I think I owe it rather to you," she laughed. "I shall go ahead now and feel that it's worth finishing."

"That's right; forget your discouragement; forget everything that happened B. C."

"B. C.?" she repeated, politely inquiring.

"Before the Caterpillar," he answered, gravely.

"Oh!" She laughed softly and seated herself again at the easel. Bistre, having failed in his search, returned and sniffed courteously at her gown. She turned and patted his flat head doubtfully. "Is he gentle?" she asked.



"Absolutely," he replied. "In fact, he is something of a *poseur*. He tries his hardest to look desperate and savage, and succeeds fairly well, but in reality he is the gentlest dog that ever ran from a cat."

"What's his name?"

"Bistre, so called because of the brown spot which disfigures his countenance, and which his master considers a badge of beauty."

"Oh, then he is not your dog?"

"No; he belongs to Mr. Brough. I am staying with him—that is, with Mr. Brough."

"Really?" Miles thought she observed him with a sudden access of interest and felt a qualm of jealousy; he wondered if she knew Hunter. "You're a nice dog," she remarked, stroking Bistre's beauty spot. Bistre closed his eyes and looked absolutely

silly. "But I must get to work," she added, and turned resolutely to her canvas. Miles took it as a dismissal.

"I suppose you will hardly finish it this morning?" he asked. She shook her head.

"No, it will take another day," she answered.

"Then perhaps I may be permitted to see it again—when it is further along?" he suggested.

"Certainly, if you would like to," she answered readily, calmly. He almost wished she wasn't quite so self-possessed. He didn't feel self-possessed, not the least in the world; and why should she?

"Thank you," he answered, "I should like to. Good-morning."

"Good-morning," she replied, and gave him the briefest sort of a perfunctory little smile, turning to her

canvas once more and apparently dismissing him utterly from her mind.

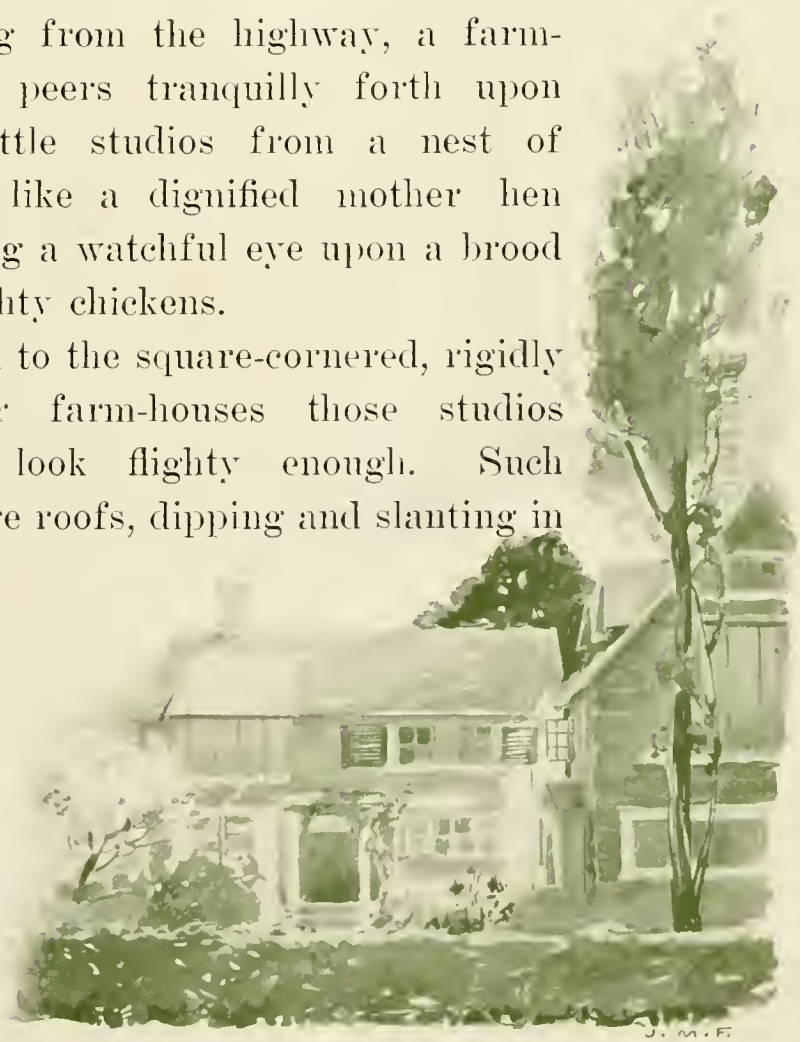
"Come on, Bistre," said Miles, glumly.

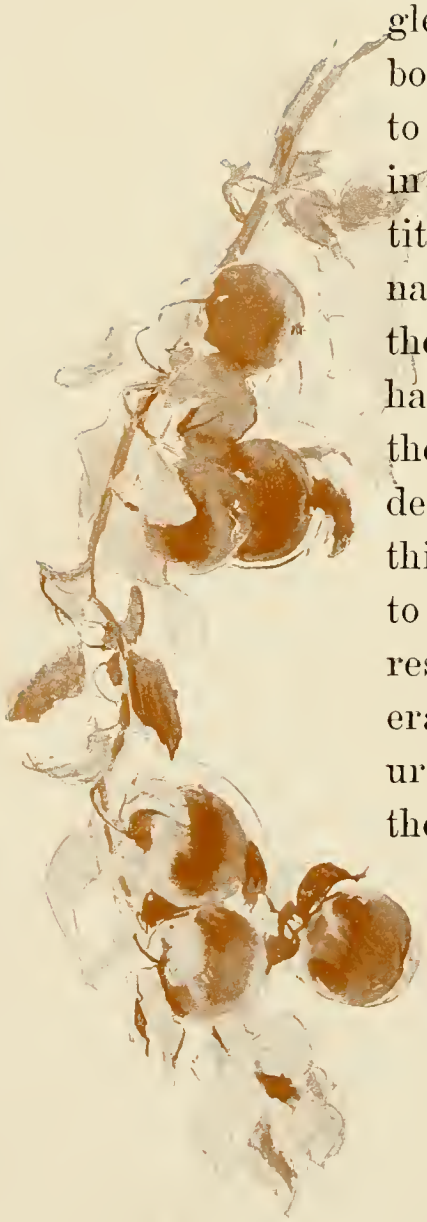
Man and dog climbed the little slope again and disappeared from sight amongst the apple-trees. A moment passed. The brook rippled and sang, the bees droned from the clustered blossoms, and overhead a lark, winging across the blue, filled the world for a space with limpid melody. Then, slowly, the girl at the easel lifted her head and, turning, looked up the slope.

III

Maple Green begins at Hunter Brough's studio and ends at the Maple Tree Inn, a quarter of a mile away. In point of fact, it is only a string of summer studios lining one side of a well-kept country road in the Connecticut hills. On the other side lie fields and orchards, squared and quadrangled by stone walls, and curving concavely upward and away into a green ridge. Here and there, always at the end of a narrow lane leading from the highway, a farm-house peers tranquilly forth upon the little studios from a nest of trees, like a dignified mother hen keeping a watchful eye upon a brood of flighty chickens.

And to the square-cornered, rigidly proper farm-houses those studios must look flighty enough. Such strange roofs, dipping and slanting in





all directions! Such absurd windows of all shapes and sizes, stuck in such absurd places! Such queer little stoops and porches set impertinently in the most unlikely spots! And then the materials used—stone, brick, shingles, stucco! Not a respectable clapboard from one end of the community to the other! (The farm-houses, being in a locality where stone in any quantity may be had for the lifting, are, naturally enough, built of wood.) But the farm-houses and their occupants have long since stopped marvelling at the strange studios and their stranger denizens; one can get used to anything! The farmers have even come to look upon the artists, if not with respect, at least with tolerance,—tolerance composed of about equal measures of gratitude and contempt; for the artists are eager purchasers of

milk, butter, eggs, and vegetables, and pay fabulous prices.

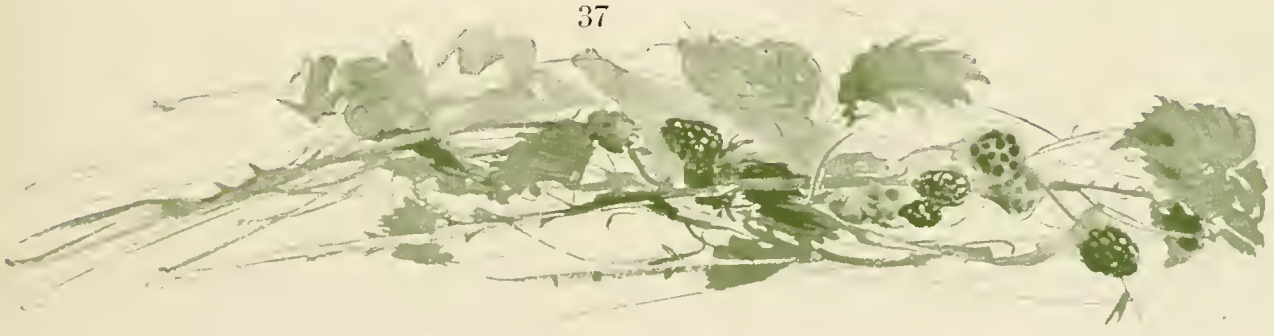
Behind the studios the ground falls away to the floor of the little valley over which, girt with alder and willow, a stream winds its way. It is a noisy, flippant little stream, filled with musical cascades and dotted with deep brown pools which promise trout but never fulfil the promise; it tinkles and bubbles and gurgles and tries to impress the world with a sense of its importance. There is a good deal of human nature about that stream. Being only an ornament, it fancies itself quite a bit as a necessity. However, importance is only relative, and I dare say to the trees and bushes that line its banks that absurd little brook seems a veritable Mississippi. Beyond the stream the ground rises again rather abruptly and climbs the

side of a very respectable hill whereon a forest of young maples holds sway. From the backs of many of the studios porches have been thrown out over the bank where, high above the murmuring brook, the citizens of Maple Green sit when the shadows lengthen on summer afternoons and sip tea from quaint cups and talk a gibberish far beyond the comprehension of the birds and squirrels listening amazedly from nearby branches.

From May to October flowers bloom from one end of Maple Green to the other; crimson ramblers clamber up snowy white lattices and dispute the eaves with wistaria and honeysuckle; nasturtiums flame along the borders and sweet peas flutter like dainty butterflies among the trellises; stocks, sweet-william, dahlias, bachelor's-buttons, and phlox—for Maple Green af-

fects the old-fashioned in flowers as well as in furnishings—fill the little gardens; so that as one travels eastward in summer or early fall along the highway his eyes must seek the right of the road occasionally for very relief from so much color.

This evening it was mild for April. The air was still and soft. Above the meadow slopes three stars gleamed tremblingly like drops of molten silver spattered against a blue canopy. The shadows were long and purple against the rose-gold light which bathed the little valley. The damp of evening brought forth a fragrance from the earth, a subtle Essence of Spring. Down the long road Maple Green was astir. The incipient sidewalk held here and there a moving couple returning from the post-office or bent upon a call. The front porches were

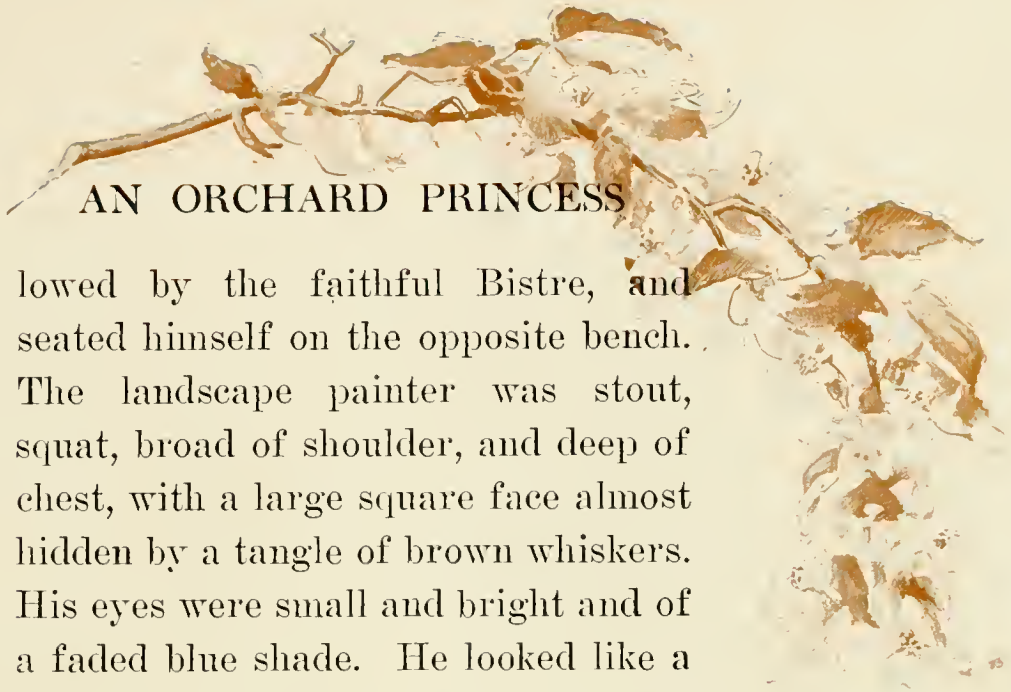


mostly occupied. Nearer at hand the Misses Ruggles, in straw garden hats tied with ribbons under their chins, were at work over their flower-beds. Miss Anamite Ruggles operated a vivid green watering-pot; Miss Veridian Ruggles used a rake with lady-like dexterity. Their soft voices reached Miles where he sat on one of the white benches of the little uncovered stoop.

"Forgive me for differing with you, dear, won't you? But the coreopsis did much better . . . morning sunlight . . ."

"I can scarcely believe that I am mistaken, dear . . . remember perfectly that the candytuft was in the corner and that the coreopsis, dear, . . ."

Hunter Brough came out in a cloud of smoke, carrying his guitar and fol-



lowed by the faithful Bistre, and seated himself on the opposite bench. The landscape painter was stout, squat, broad of shoulder, and deep of chest, with a large square face almost hidden by a tangle of brown whiskers. His eyes were small and bright and of a faded blue shade. He looked like a successful commission merchant. His hands were a never-ceasing wonder to Miles. They were broad and pudgy, short of finger and incompetent-looking. And yet they performed wonders with the paint-brush and worked miracles with the strings of a guitar. Throwing one huge leg over the other and leaning his head against the trellis at his back, he began to play softly. At moments the volumes of smoke bursting from under his thick moustache hid his face from view. He had a deep voice, which, gruff and almost

discordant in conversation, was rich and sweet when he sang.

"The Bachelor! The Bachelor!
The man who lives in joy!
Whose cares are few, whose friends are true,
Whose peace holds no alloy;
Who lights his pipe and fills his bowl,
Cries 'Fie!' to care and strife—O!
Who takes a sip from ev'ry lip
And leads a merry life—O!

"God bless the jolly Bachelor,
Who's ever blithe and gay;
Who, when he won't, my lad, he don't,
And when he would, he may!"

Miles grinned across through the intermingling smoke. Hunter Brough tinkled the strings and went on.

"The Bachelor! The Bachelor!
The wight who lives alone,
With friends to share his pleasures fair,
But none to hear his moan;

"THAT'S A SILLY TUNE," SAID MILES

With elbows out and heels run in,
For lacking of a wife—O!
With lips to kiss, but no lips his,
He leads a sorry life—O!

"God help the povern Bachelor
When heart and hair grow gray,
With little joy for aught, my boy,
Save having of his way!"

"That's a silly tune," said Miles. The other blinked across at him calmly.

"There's many a true word spoken in song," he answered, solemnly. "How old are you, Miles?"

"Thirty-one, please your Honor."

"You ought to be married," said the artist, severely. "You're wasting your time."

"The deuce you say! Well, from a confirmed, disgruntled old bach like you that comes well!"

"It would do you good in more ways

than one,'' continued his friend, calmly. ''It would settle you——''

''I fear it would!''

''And give you a new point of view—which you need! The idea of a novelist—a successful one at that—never having been in love! Poppycock!''

''Never in love!'' exclaimed the other. ''You wrong me! You don't know all!''

''Well, were you?''

''Once,'' answered Miles, sadly. ''I will tell you about it. She was——''

''No, you won't, either!'' interrupted Hunter. ''You've never been decently in love in your life. And you pretend to write novels! To be sure, you fight shy of love-scenes; I'll give you credit for knowing a few of your limitations; but you've got an infernal cheek to write at all under the cir-

cumstances. You're only half educated, my boy!"

"Hear him!" observed Miles, tragically, addressing himself to Bistre. "I ask you to hear him! Forty-odd years old, a confirmed woman-hater, and railing at me because I don't marry! Inconsistency, thy name is Hunter!"

"Oh, you may laugh," responded the other, gruffly, "but I'm talking sense. You need to get your wings singed once or twice, my boy! Then you might be able to picture a woman that looked like a woman and not a bundle of silk and lace. Look at that girl in that last book of yours; what's her name? Hortense? Gertrude?"

"Caroline," answered the novelist, meekly.

"Caroline, then. Huh! Call her a woman? Stick to your outlandish

cowboys and ranchers; the public seems to like those well enough; but for Heaven's sake let women alone—until you know 'em!"

"Hunter, you have hurt me deeply," sighed Miles. "I thought Caroline was pretty well drawn, and now you tell me that she is only a bundle of silk and lace! To-morrow I shall go out and fall in love straightway with the first woman I set eyes on. Maybe she'll have a husband and a large family dependent on her; then you'll be sorry you spoke as you have; sorry you drove me to desperation. Think of the bereaved husband and the seven—did I say seven?—seven motherless children! Think——"

"Oh, I don't believe the husband's in any danger."

"That's because you've never seen me in the rôle of Don Juan, Hunter. I

wish you'd let me tell you about that affair of mine, that single romance of my lonely life!''

''Get out!''

Hunter lighted his pipe again and then set his fingers darting over the strings in a rag-time melody, his foot beating time on the floor. Miles hummed the words under his breath a minute. Then he asked, suddenly,—

''Who's here this spring, Hunter?''

''Not many yet; our most noted citizens don't come along until hot weather drives them from town. They don't know what they miss. At present there are the Ruggleses, the Hopkinses, the Tafts——''

''Who are they?''

''Horace Taft, water-color painter, and his wife.''

''Old?''

"Seems to me you're getting inquisitive. He's about forty and she's a few years younger."

"Oh!"

"Just so! Then, in the brick cottage with the covered porch, there is Merrill Link. Want to know about him?"

"No, thanks."

"Then come the Beatties, mother and daughter."

"Artists?"

"No; you ought to know Mrs. Beattie; she's one of these passionate poetesses you read about. The daughter dabbles in art, I believe."

"Dabbles!" said Miles, indignantly. "Much you know about it!"

"Eh? You know her, then?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, then, how do you know whether she dabbles or not? Maybe

you'd call it painting; you've got queer ideas on art."

"No queerer than your ideas on literature!"

"Maybe; every man to his trade. Meanwhile, I insist that Bijou Beattie does dabble."

"Bijou?"

"Yes; sweet name, isn't it? And suits her so well!"

"Does it?"

"Well, doesn't it? You've seen her, haven't you?"

"I'm not sure. Is she rather slight and graceful, with yellowish hair and——"

"No, she's not," answered Hunter, gruffly. "She's tall and awkward and has dark hair, which she wears tied in a bundle on top of her silly head. And she wears things that fit her too quick, much too quick."

Miles sighed with relief.

"Then I don't think I've seen her."

"Well, what are you so interested in her for, then?"

"I'm not at all interested in her," answered Miles, calmly. His host stopped playing and stared at him.

"Where does it seem to affect you the worst?" he asked, with elaborate concern. "Would you like to see a doctor?"

"Shut up!" answered Miles. "Who else is here?" Hunter nursed his pipe a moment.

"That's about all, I guess," he replied, after a moment. "Or no, Simpkins came down last week."

"Simpkins?" repeated Miles questioningly.

"Yes, *Simpkins!* Interested in Simpkins?"

"No, I think not. Is he married?"

"Not that I know of; why?"

"Just wondered. And there's no one else here?"

"Maybe some one at the Inn; I don't know," answered the other, impatiently. "Usually is."

"Oh!" mused Miles. "The Inn!"

Hunter Brough grunted and summoned a series of discords from the instrument that made Miles writhe in his seat and brought a groan of protest from Bistre. Presently,—

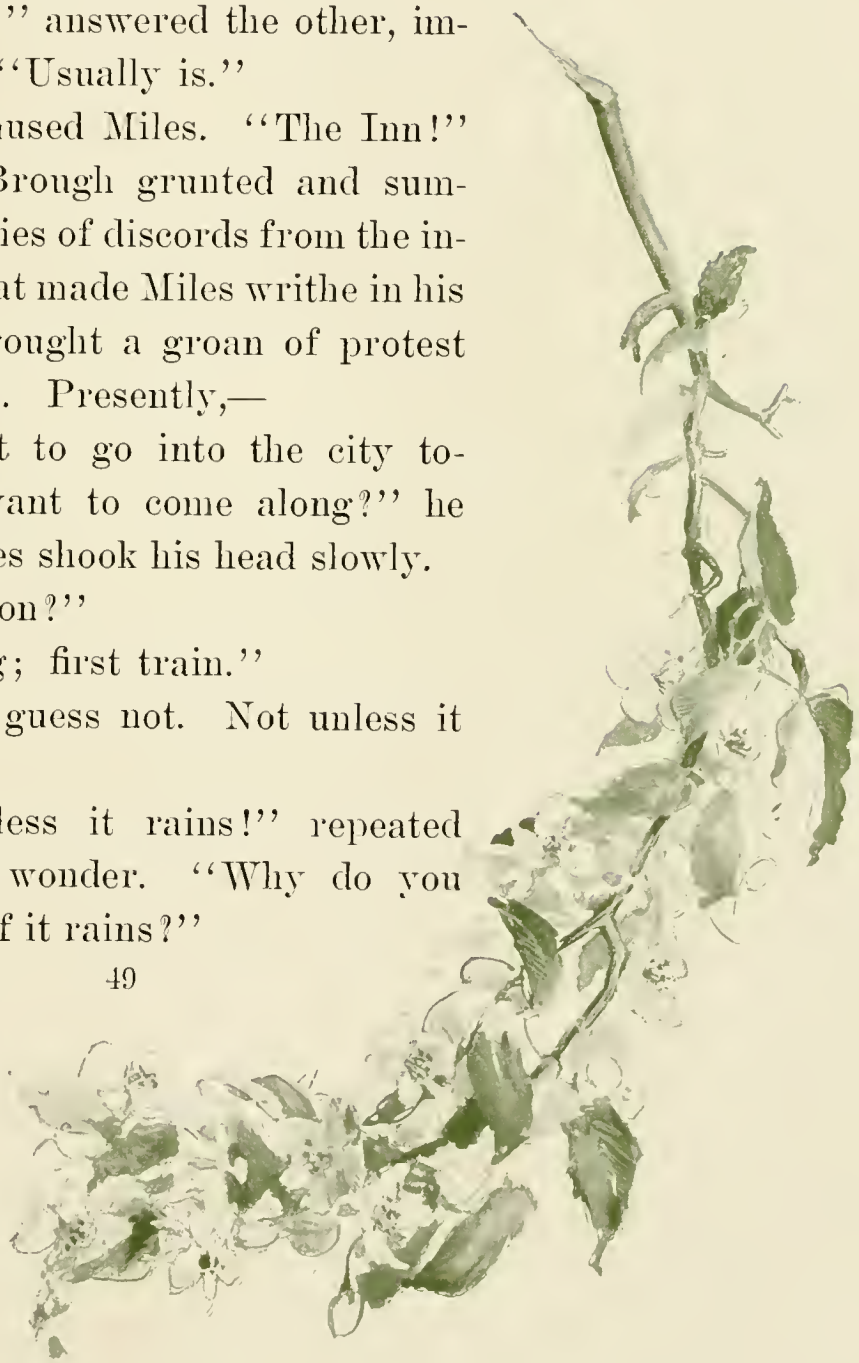
"I've got to go into the city tomorrow; want to come along?" he asked. Miles shook his head slowly.

"Afternoon?"

"Morning; first train."

"N-no, I guess not. Not unless it rains."

"Not unless it rains!" repeated Hunter, in wonder. "Why do you want to go if it rains?"



"I don't."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned the artist. "He's as mad as a March hare!"

"You don't think it will rain, do you?" Miles asked.

"No, I don't," answered Hunter, irascibly. He wandered off into a slow waltz tune, humming softly. The valley was in twilight. Lights shone from the windows down the road and twinkled from the farm-houses across the meadows. From behind the cottage came the chatter of the little stream, subdued and lulling. In the purple heavens a multitude of white stars scintillated. A little breath, damp and chill, crept down the long slope and fluttered the leaves.

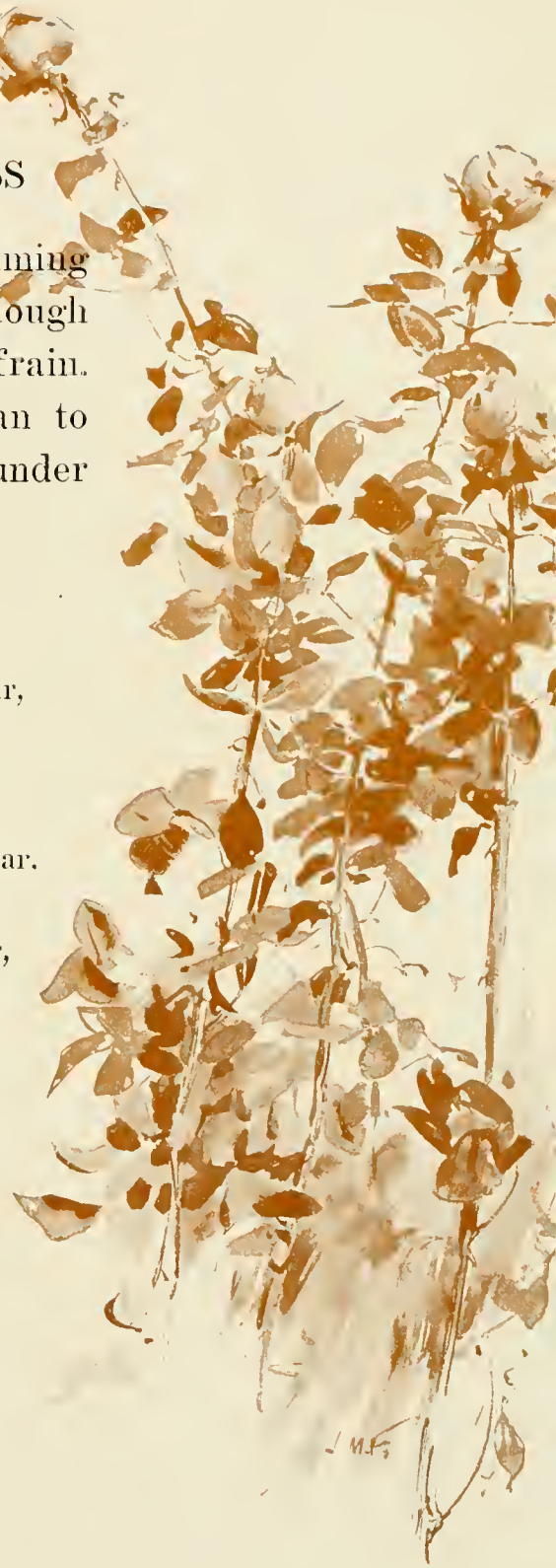
"It's getting cold," murmured Miles, arousing himself from his thoughts. "Let's go in."

There was no reply from the oppo-

site bench. The artist was strumming the strings tentatively, as though searching for a forgotten refrain. Presently he found it and began to sing an accompaniment softly, under his breath:

"The world is very wide, dear,
The heavens very high,
And save the winds and tide, dear,
'Tis I alone know why,
'Tis I alone know why.

"The earth was made so grand, dear,
The heav'ns so far above,
That you might understand, dear,
How wide and deep my love,
How wide and deep my love."



IV

Nature repeated herself the next morning. There was the same blue sky, the same pile of downy white clouds in the west, the same ethereal gold flooding the April land, the same stillness, as though Nature held finger to lip. And, as before, the air was sweet with the fragrance of apple-blossoms.

Miles watched Hunter Brough seat himself in the Inn carryall, a canvas wrapped in newspapers held carefully on his knees, and disappear in the direction of the railroad. So did Bistre. Bistre had a philosophy of his

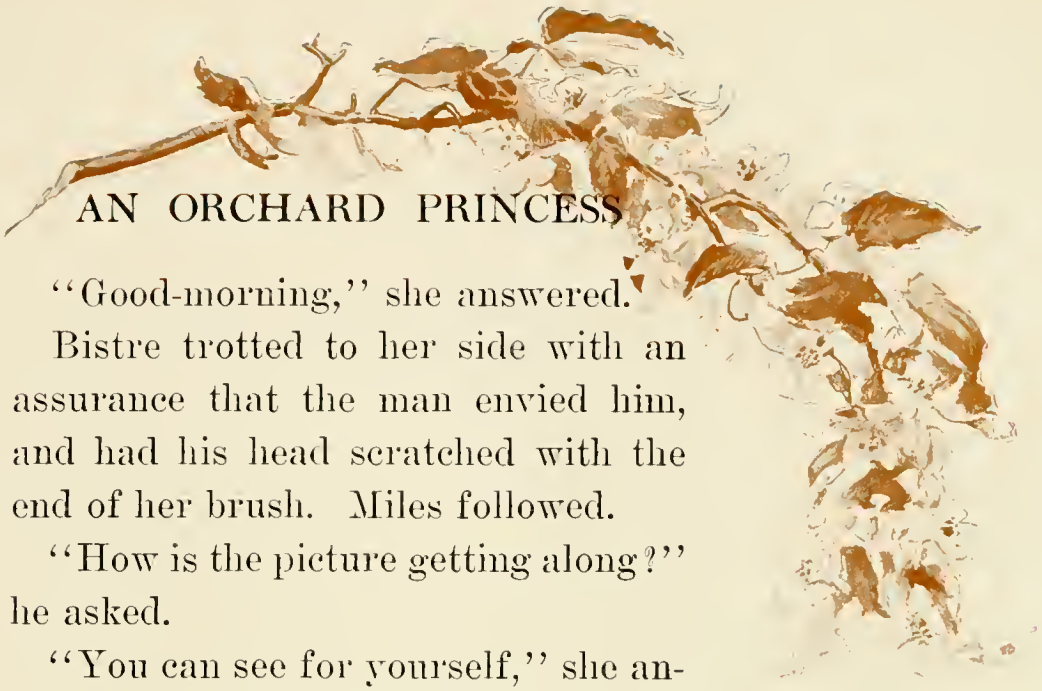
own, and a clause of it was, "Recognize the inevitable and accept it with good grace." Having been thrust ignominiously from the carriage five separate times, he realized that Fate was against him and accepted her decision. He retired to the stoop and viewed the disappearing vehicle with well-simulated relief, glancing at Miles as if to say, "Well, I'm glad *we* don't have to go to town, aren't you?"

Miles prepared his pipe for an after-breakfast smoke, snapped his fingers at Bistre, and set off westward along the highway. When he came to the grass-grown lane he turned into it, vaulted the stone wall, and, whistling carelessly, made his way through the orchard. The sunlight slanted down amidst the branches and kissed the pink petals and the tiny green leaves. The grass was wet with dew; each

blade held its quota of quivering, shimmering gems. The bees had already begun their long day's task, and their drooning chant formed a musical background for the florid pæans of unseen birds. When he reached the edge of the little clearing, Miles's gaze darted eagerly toward the scene of yesterday's meeting. There again were the easel and the girl. But to-day the golden hair was hidden by the blue sun-bonnet, and Miles could see naught of the face which since the day before had filled his thoughts to the exclusion of all else.

"Good-morning," he called.

The sun-bonnet turned until the picture it framed was visible. A moment the girl looked at him in silence, and Miles felt a stab of disappointment; it was as though she were striving to recollect him. Then,—



"Good-morning," she answered.

Bistre trotted to her side with an assurance that the man envied him, and had his head scratched with the end of her brush. Miles followed.

"How is the picture getting along?" he asked.

"You can see for yourself," she answered. "I haven't done much yet; I am waiting for the sun to get up a little higher; the shadows, you see, are still rather weak."

She turned toward him and he caught a fleeting glimpse of soft blue eyes under golden-brown lashes, of pink cheeks, and of a gleam of white teeth between the parted lips. Then he was looking down on to a blue cotton sun-bonnet again. He detested that bonnet. He moved his gaze to the canvas. The picture had not grown much; here and there the sketchy

charcoal strokes still showed against the creamy canvas.

"Do you sell your pictures?" he asked.

"Oh, yes; that is, when I can."

"And this one? It will be for sale?"

"I suppose so." She seemed a bit surprised.

"What I meant was," he hurried to explain, "that I'd like to buy it if—if you decide to sell it."

"Thank you," she replied. "But perhaps you had better wait until you see it finished before you commit yourself. It may not turn out so well, after all."

"Has the discouragement returned?" he asked. "Surely, on a morning like this discouragement isn't possible!"

"In my case," she said, gravely,

"discouragement is no respecter of—weather conditions. Still, so far it has not troubled me to-day."

"But—forgive me if I seem impertinent—but surely it can possess no great terror for you, since you are able to do such things as that." He nodded toward the canvas, yet kept his eyes on the tip of the obnoxious bonnet, fearful lest he miss a glimpse of the face beneath. "Surely success and discouragement can't keep company."

"Are you never discouraged?" she asked, looking up.

"I? Why, yes, sometimes; just a little."

"And yet you are successful, far more so than I."

"Well, but—how do you know I am successful?"

"Isn't it success to write books peo-

ple like, to write well—and to sell well?''

''Oh! Then I am not incognito to you?''

She laughed softly, and the sunbonnet moved from side to side.

''No. You see, Maple Green is not so large that a new-comer can remain long a mystery.''

''I see. I am sorry, though; I had hoped you would mistake me for a wandering Person of Importance, perchance even for a—a prince.''

''No,''—she raised her face and observed him gravely for a long moment,—''no, I don't think I should have mistaken you for a prince.''

''Oh, I say! Why not, now? Really, princes aren't so different from the rest of us.''

''Perhaps, but—you don't look like a prince.''

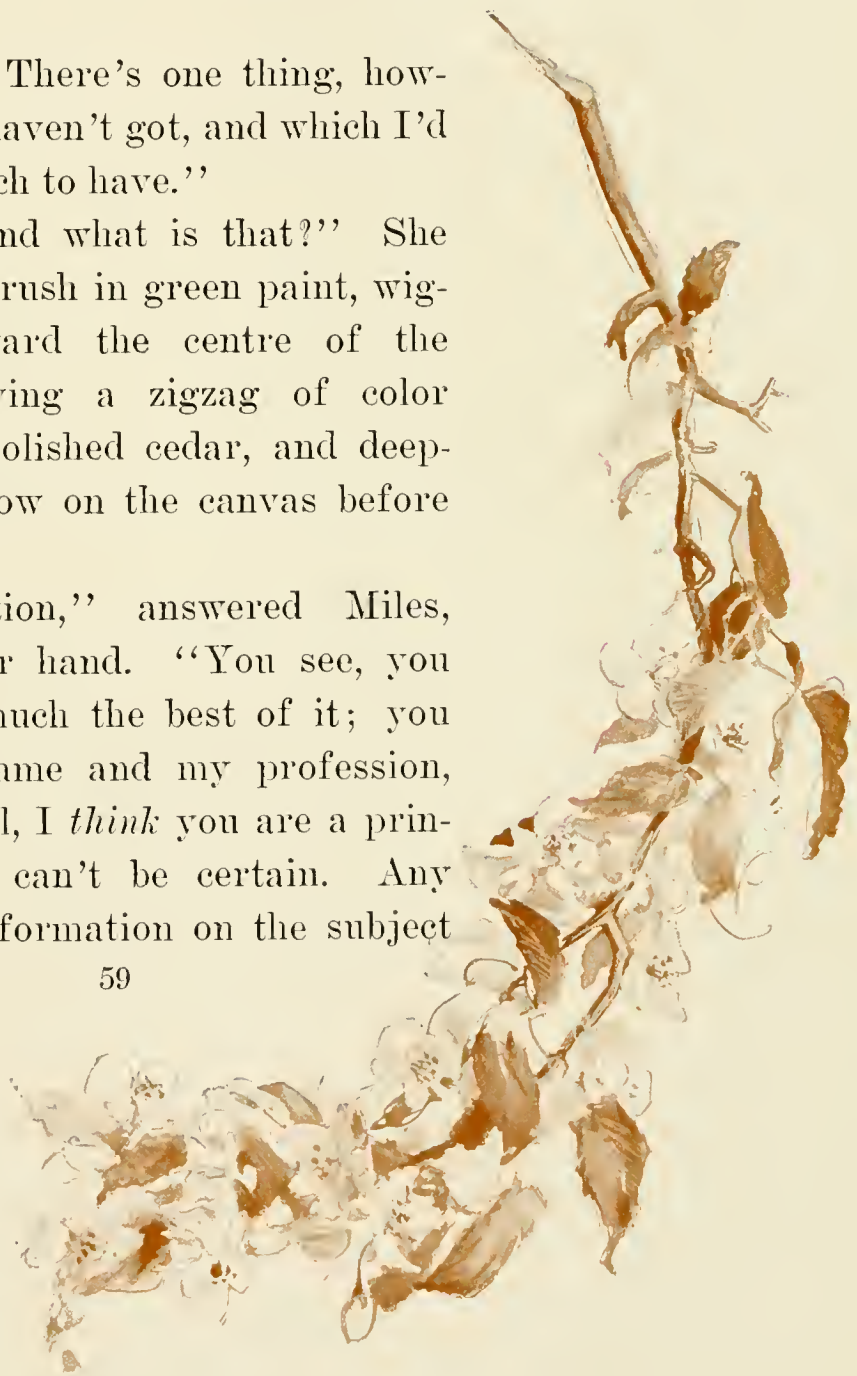
"I am sorry," he said again. "I—I'd like very much to be one."

"You should be satisfied with what you are—and have," she answered, lightly.

"Maybe. There's one thing, however, that I haven't got, and which I'd like very much to have."

"Yes? And what is that?" She dipped her brush in green paint, wiggled it toward the centre of the palette, leaving a zigzag of color across the polished cedar, and deepened a shadow on the canvas before her.

"Information," answered Miles, watching her hand. "You see, you have very much the best of it; you know my name and my profession, while I—well, I *think* you are a princess, but I can't be certain. Any scraps of information on the subject



which you may be willing to let fall will be gratefully received."

"Oh, I am Miss Lynde; profession, landscape painter in oils; present place of abode, Maple Tree Inn. Are you happier?"

"Infinitely. Thank you very much. As you have said, Maple Green is small, and naturally——"

"Why is it," she laughed, "that a man always tries to apologize for his curiosity?"

"I don't think I was apologizing," answered Miles. "I was merely—explaining."

"Oh, then I beg your pardon. You see, it sounded like an apology. There, I think I can get to work now; the shadows are much better."

"Then I will leave you," said Miles, cheerfully. "I don't want to interfere with your work."

"Thank you," she answered. "Before you go, would you mind pushing my paint-box a little nearer?"

"Not at all," he replied, as he obeyed.

"Thank you ever so much," she said. "Good-morning."

"Good-morning," echoed Miles.

Thereupon he ascended the slope fully twelve feet and seated himself on a convement hummock. The position had its advantages; he was rather more in front of her than he had been, and it was possible to look under the sun-bonnet. He took advantage of the possibility now and found himself gazing into a pair of surprised blue eyes.

"I thought——!" she began.

"You thought?" he asked, concernedly.

"I thought you were going."

"I have gone," he answered, calmly.

"Oh!"

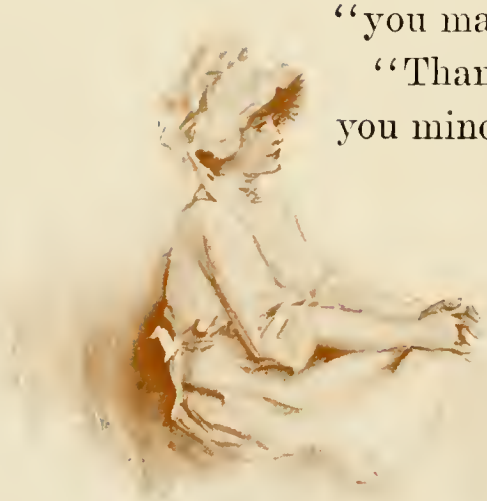
"Yes, I didn't want to be in your way, so I took myself off. I'm really rather thoughtful of others. Come here, Bistre; you are not to disturb Miss Lynde, sir. You must retire into the distance with me and share my exile."

"I fear you don't know the difference between distance and foreground," said the girl.

"I am not up on matters pertaining to art," he answered, easily. "We are Philistines, Bistre and I. But please don't let us disturb you. We are quite content to sit here and only speak when we're spoken to."

"On that condition," she replied, "you may remain."

"Thank you," he murmured. "Do you mind if I smoke a pipe?"



"Since you are no longer here," she answered, gravely, "how can it concern me?"

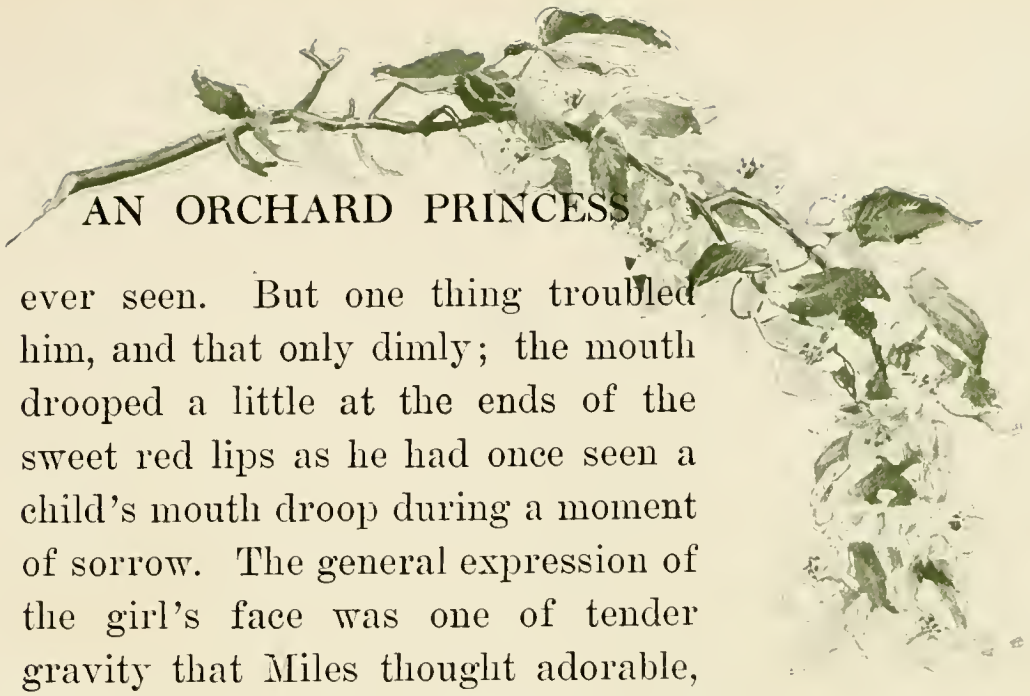
"But—er—if I hadn't gone?"

"I shouldn't have minded."

He lighted his briar, leaned elbows on knees, and watched her frankly. Dislike the sun-bonnet as he might, he was forced to acknowledge that it made a charming setting for her face, throwing it into the softest of shadow save where a sunbeam crept past its jealous edge and danced and quivered on the firmly rounded chin. Occasionally, when the head was turned a little toward him, he saw glints of blue under the long golden-brown lashes, and at such moments felt strange thrills of excitement. He found himself wondering with a leaping heart what it would be to have those blue eyes looking straight into his from

a distance of—well, say the length of his pipe! He wondered what he would say — do! He sighed — and wondered why. Then he puffed furiously at his pipe until Bistre, coughing and sneezing, dragged himself away with a reproachful look from his round brown eyes.

Had one coldly dissected the face under the bonnet feature by feature, one might have found cause for dissatisfaction. Perhaps the face was a trifle long for absolute beauty, the cheeks a trifle too thin. Perhaps, too, one might have found fault with the chin; maybe it was a bit too firmly formed for a woman's face, a little too strong in contour despite its smooth roundness. But Miles, for once at least, was not analytical. To him the face was absolutely the most charming, the most wonderful, he had



ever seen. But one thing troubled him, and that only dimly; the mouth drooped a little at the ends of the sweet red lips as he had once seen a child's mouth droop during a moment of sorrow. The general expression of the girl's face was one of tender gravity that Miles thought adorable, but the pathos of the drooping lips disturbed him. He wondered whether she was unhappy. It might be; he knew nothing of her beyond her name and profession. Perhaps—and there was a sudden dismal sinking of his heart at thought of the possibility—perhaps she had had an unfortunate love affair! At twenty-two—and he judged her to be of that age—it is possible to have experienced both love and disappointment. The thought aroused in him both an absurd jealousy and an equally absurd desire to

comfort and protect her. And yet—and he was forced to acknowledge it ruefully—she didn't look the least bit in the world like a person requiring either sympathy or protection. There was a confidence about her every look and gesture that made the idea seem utterly incongruous. Miles found himself wishing selfishly that she was not so evidently capable and self-reliant.

His pipe had gone out during his period of reflection, and he scratched a match to relight it. At the sound the girl turned and looked at him in smiling despair.

"I wish——! Can't you see," she asked, helplessly, "that I can't paint while you sit there staring at me?"

"Was I staring?" he asked, hypocritically.

"Well, weren't you?"

"Oh, yes."

"But it—it makes me nervous! I'm not used to having folks around when I'm at work."

"I see. Then you want me to go away?—that is, still farther away?"

She hesitated, observing him perplexedly.

"If only you'd turn your back," she suggested. "I suppose I've no right to send you away, since this is no more my property than it is yours. But, really, it is so hard to paint when you know some one is looking at you."

"The correct thing for me to do," said Miles, thoughtfully, "would be to arise,—in this manner,—bow,—like this,—and say, 'My dear young lady, whether I have equal rights with you to remain on this property doesn't enter into the question. The mere fact that my presence—even at a dis-

tance—annoys you is sufficient. I will retire at once.' ''

''Well?'' she asked, as he finished. He seated himself again on the hummock.

''That is what I *ought* to say,'' he answered, calmly. ''What I do say is this: let us compromise. I will retire to the next available seat, which appears to be some ten feet farther up the bank,—and, since it is in shade, must be very damp,—or I will remain where I am and half turn my back to you. You see, I shouldn't like to be guilty of the impropriety of turning my back entirely on a lady.''

''But I'd know you were there just the same,'' she objected, laughingly. Her laughter was so infrequent that Miles felt flushed with victory whenever he summoned it.

''Then I will go farther away,'' he

answered, promptly. "Only, if I should catch cold and have something serious, like—like hay fever or influenza, you'd reproach yourself, I'm sure."

"Oh, dear!" she sighed, turning again to her canvas. "Stay where you like."

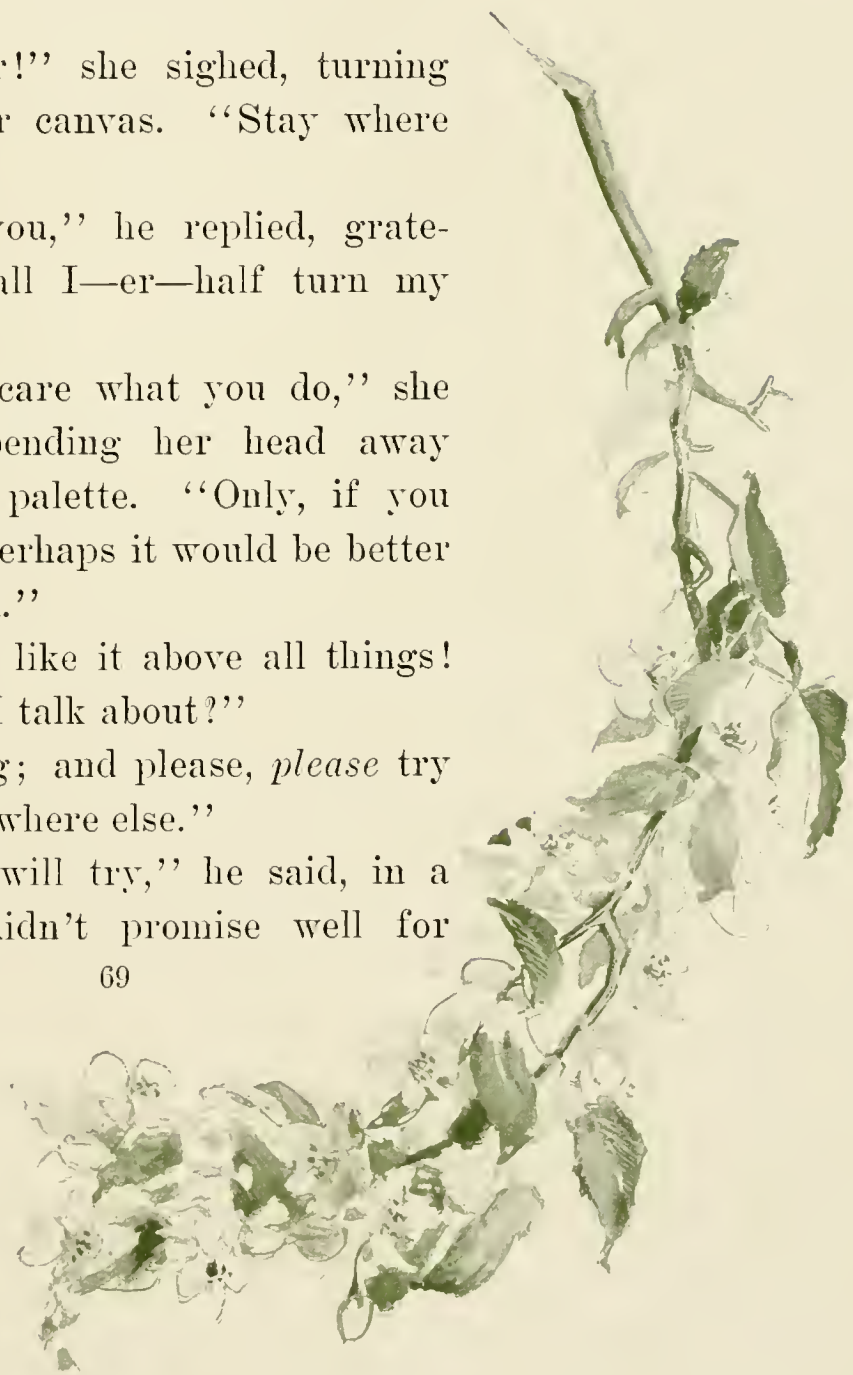
"Thank you," he replied, gratefully. "Shall I—er—half turn my back?"

"I don't care what you do," she answered, bending her head away toward her palette. "Only, if you must stay, perhaps it would be better if you talked."

"I should like it above all things! What shall I talk about?"

"Anything; and please, *please* try to look somewhere else."

"Well, I will try," he said, in a tone that didn't promise well for



success. He turned his gaze toward the tops of the apple-trees across the glade and began, in a monotonous voice:

"What very lovely weather we are having for the time of year. I am creditably informed that it is quite unusual. Crops, I am told, are much farther advanced than they were at this time last year. The wheat is in splendid condition. The apple crop, if one is to judge by the quantity of blossoms, will be very large. I trust that it will prove so. I am very fond of apples. I like them in pies, in puddings, in sauce, and in cider; although I don't think they very often find their way into the latter nowadays. I also like them baked, with an accompaniment of cream and sugar. When I was somewhat younger I was not so discriminating, so particular. I liked

them most any old way then; especially hard and green."

He paused, took a deep breath, and began again.

"The apple is a very useful fruit. Without the apple we should have had no original sin. Perhaps, however, I may be mistaken there; possibly Eve would have eaten a pear instead. At all events, the apple——"

"Mr. Fallon!"

Miles, interrupted, brought his eyes to earth and fixed them upon the face of the girl.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked.

"*How* do you think I can work?" she asked, despairingly.

"You don't like apples, then? But you have only to indicate the subject you wish me to discourse on, Miss Lynde. I assure you I can talk intelligently, even interestingly, on almost

any subject under the sun. Please try me."

"Very well, then," she answered, maliciously, "tell me about your work; how you write your novels, where you find the characters, how you think of your plots."

"Do you mean it?" he asked, dejectedly.

"Yes," she replied, firmly.

"Well," he began, hesitatingly. Then there was a silence. Presently she looked up to find his gaze fixed upon her pleadingly. "I'd very much rather not, you know," he said.

"Then you must behave yourself," she answered, severely. "I've only got a very little left to do, and when it is done I shall leave you to the undisputed enjoyment of this spot. Meanwhile, please don't disturb me with any more information about apples.

Tell me how you like Maple Green. Is it your first visit here?''

''Yes, my first,'' he answered. ''I like it very much. I especially like the outskirts of it—this spot, for instance.''

''Have you met the—the inhabitants?''

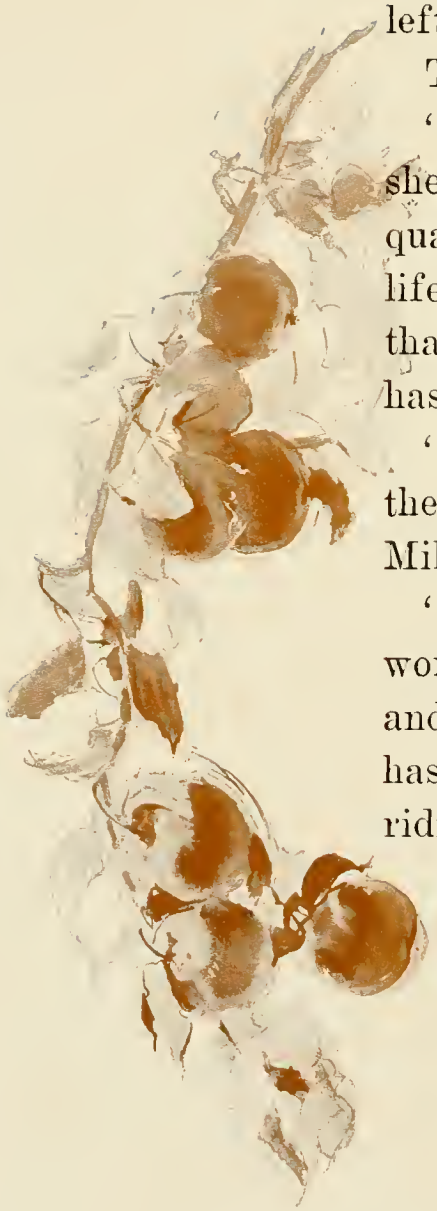
''Some; the Misses Ruggles I have had the pleasure of meeting.''

She smiled above her brush.

Aren't they delightful?'' she asked.

''Terrifying, I call them. Hunter took me around there the other day for afternoon tea. They asked me what I thought of Wagner's 'The Simple Life.' I said I didn't remember of having heard it, but didn't care for Wagner—pronouncing it with a waggish W for politeness—very much. I thought they looked pained and sur-

prised. Afterwards Hunter told me that Wagner was a writer chap and that 'The Simple Life' was a book. You see, I spent the winter in Arizona and thereabouts, and 'The Simple Life' hadn't reached there when I left."



The girl at the easel laughed softly.

"They're dear old souls, though," she said. "So old-fashioned and quaint; I think they live the simple life themselves. I've heard it said that they never paint a flower that hasn't come out of their own garden."

"Their pictures, what I saw of them, seemed rather clever" said Miles, doubtfully.

"Oh, they are! They've made a wonderful reputation for themselves and get fabulous prices. And no one has ever been able to tell Miss Veridian's work from Miss Anamite's;

they paint just alike; in fact, they do everything alike, and they look so much alike that it was a long time before I was able to tell which was which."

"Well, I dare say their paintings are very nice," Miles responded, "but I can't say that I ever saw flowers look just like theirs do."

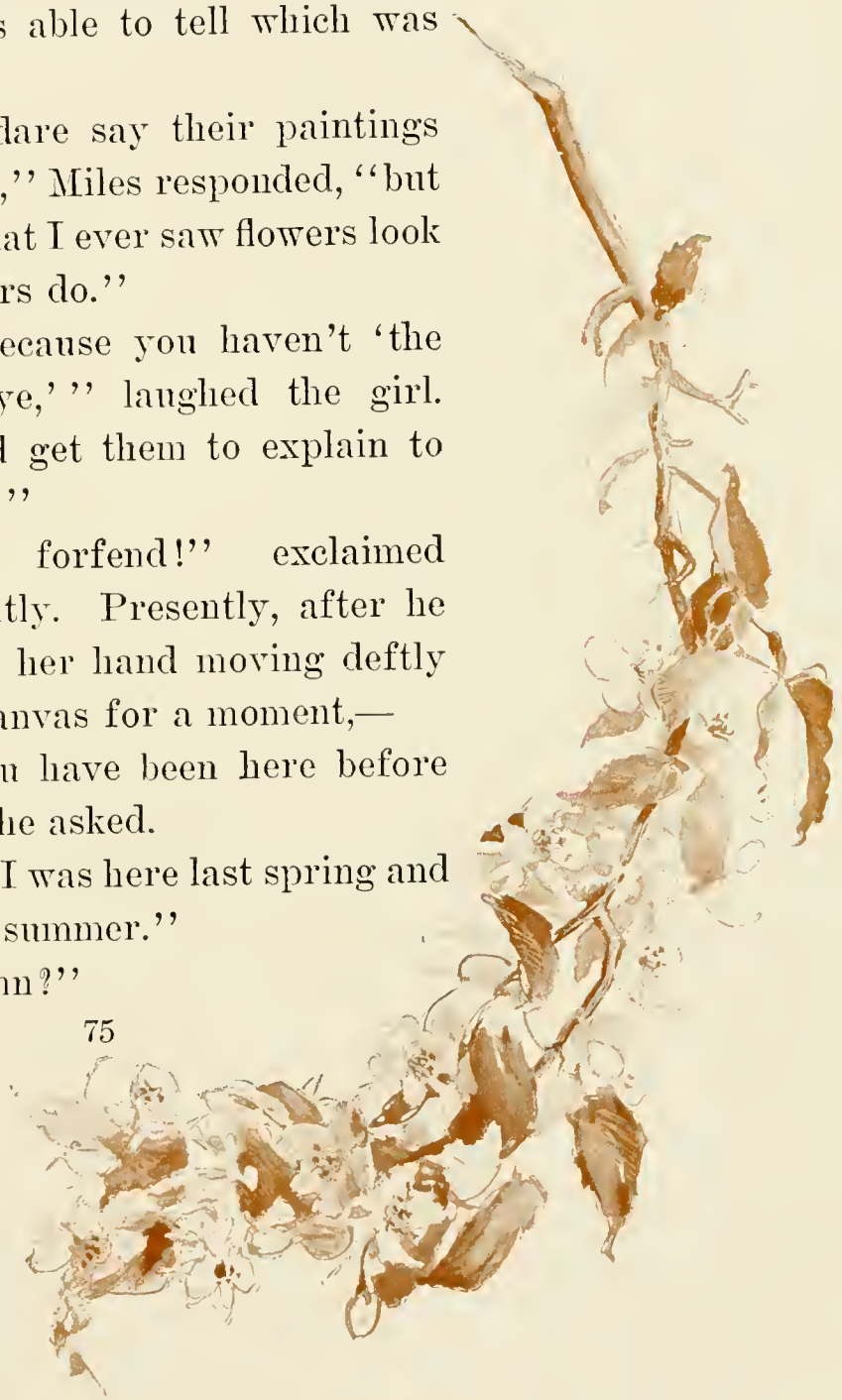
"That's because you haven't 'the cultivated eye,'" laughed the girl. "You should get them to explain to you about it."

"Heaven forfend!" exclaimed Miles, devoutly. Presently, after he had watched her hand moving deftly before the canvas for a moment,—

"Then you have been here before this year?" he asked.

"Oh, yes; I was here last spring and again in the summer."

"At the Inn?"



She nodded.

"But isn't it—don't you find it a bit lonesome—by yourself, I mean?"

There was a little shrug of the slim shoulders.

"It is better to be lonesome than bored," she answered, a trifle cynically. Miles flushed. She turned swiftly and surprised the look on his face.

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way!" she cried, in dismay. "Please, I didn't, really! You'll believe me, won't you?"

"Of course," he answered, smilingly. "But you might have meant it, and said it with good cause. I have been discourteous in forcing my presence on you as I have, and I dare say I have bored you horribly."

"Please!" she cried again, pleadingly. "You haven't! I had no

thought of you when I said that. Won't you please believe me, Mr. Fallon?"

"Certainly I will. And it's kind of you not to mean it—that way. Tell me, you've been in Paris, haven't you?"

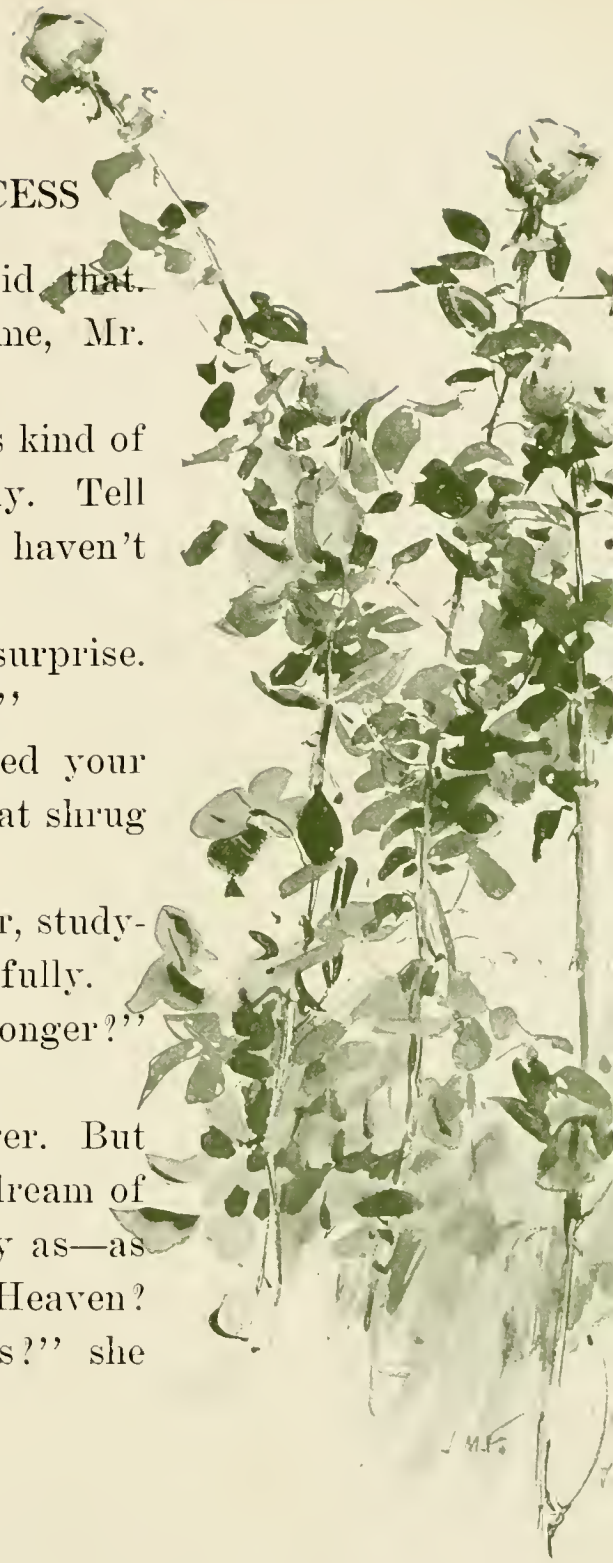
"Yes," she answered, in surprise. "Why? How did you know?"

"By the way you shrugged your shoulders a moment ago. That shrug is caught only there."

"Oh, yes, I was there a year, studying," she answered, a bit wistfully.

"And you wanted to stay longer?" he asked, softly.

"Yes, I wanted to stay longer. But I couldn't. Do you know, I dream of going back to Paris some day as—as some folks dream of going to Heaven? Does that sound sacrilegious?" she asked, with a smile.



"I fancy I know the feeling," he answered, gravely. "As for Paris, it holds little that I care for; but once, a few years ago, I was taken ill and the doctors said I wouldn't pull through. I didn't care so much about the mere dying, but the thought that I would never see the dawn on the mesas again, never again feel the warm breath of the Chinook on my face, was—hard. I suppose you feel that way about Paris."

"Yes." She had dropped the hand holding the brush and was gazing thoughtfully past him. "Yes," she repeated, softly, "that's the way I feel about Paris. It was a year of another life to me, a year of hard work, but a dear, sweet one." Her gaze wandered back to the canvas and, with a little sigh, she took up her work again.

"And you had to leave—why?" asked Miles.

"I was needed here, at home," she answered. "There!" She put down her brush and arose. "I mustn't touch it again. It's finished."

Miles arose and went to the easel. After a moment he turned to find her eyes on him anxiously.

"Oh, I like it immensely," he said, smilingly, answering her unspoken question. "But, as you know, I'm no judge. Like a multitude of other benighted souls, I only 'know what I like.' And I like that. But you haven't quite finished it, have you? Don't you usually sign them?"

She smiled, dipped a small brush in the paint, and, stooping, printed "P. Lynde" in a lower corner.

"'P. Lynde,'" said Miles. "Now I wonder what that P. stands for."

"I wonder," she said, gravely, closing her paint-box.

"Priscilla?"

She shook her head.

"Er—not—not Polly?"

Again she shook her head.

"Perhaps," she said, "it means just Miss Lynde."

"No, I think it means more," he answered, shaking his own head. "Of course one can find out."

"Of course, if one asks the neighbors; but as that might be thought rather queer, I don't think—one will."

"No, that's so. I shall have to look to you for the solution, after all. Some day you'll tell me, won't you?"

"I don't see why I should," she answered, calmly. "Do you?"

"Yes, I see—but I shan't tell you; at least, not at present," he answered, boldly. She shot a questioning and

somewhat troubled look from her blue eyes. Then she took the canvas from the easel.

"Here, let me help you," he begged. "You don't mean to say that you carry all this truck around every day?"

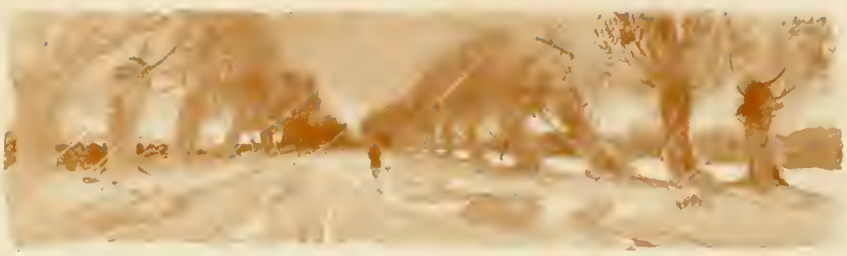
"It's not heavy," she answered.

"But you'll let me carry the easel and box for you?"

"I'd rather you didn't trouble yourself," she answered.

"But your way is mine, and if I may?"

She bent her head without answering and led the way down the glade toward the road. Miles followed. So did Bistre.



V

"Patty," murmured Miles.

Hunter looked up from the letter he was writing.

"Eh?" he asked. Miles started and observed him blankly.

"Did you speak?"

"I asked what you said," responded the other.

"Oh! Did I—say anything?"

"You did; you mentioned patties, I think."

"Patties? Ah, I was probably thinking of lunch."

"Well, you won't get patties, I guess," answered Hunter, dryly. "Think of cold roast beef and pickled

walnuts, salad and ale, if you must think of lunch. Only, as it is just a little after eleven, you had better make up your mind to have patience."

"*Patience?*" cried Miles, triumphantly, sitting up so suddenly on the window-seat that Bistre went tumbling to the floor. And, "Patience?" he repeated, questioningly, thoughtfully.

Hunter laid down his pen and looked across in bewilderment.

"What under the sun is the matter with you this morning?" he growled. Miles settled back again amidst the cushions.

"Er—it just occurred to me that I might amuse myself with the cards," he answered. Hunter grunted.

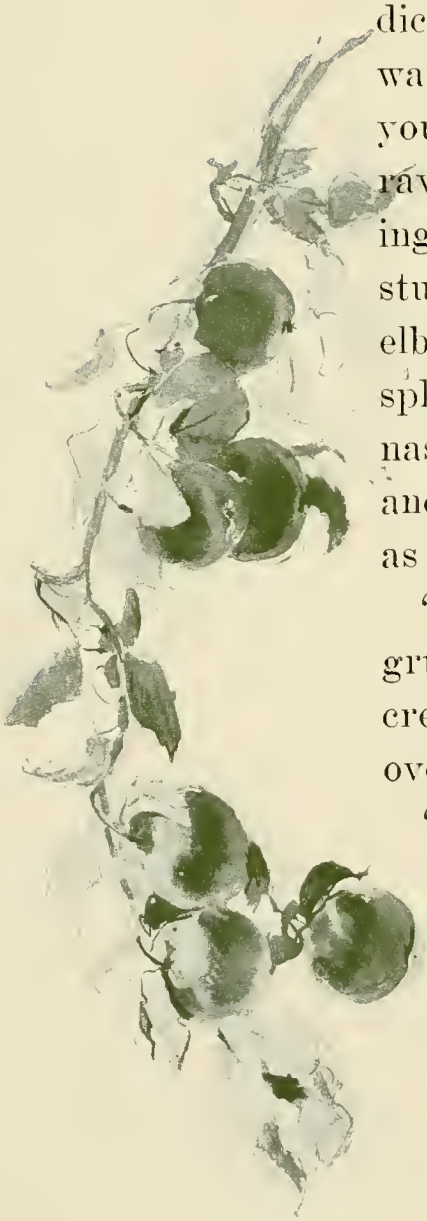
"You'll find them in the drawer over there," he said. "But I hate to

think you find life so dull here that you have to play patience. Of all occupations in the world——!''

''Oh, everything goes on a day like this,'' answered his guest. But he made no move toward the drawer indicated by his host. Out-of-doors a warm rain was falling, washing the young leaves of the maples across the ravine, and with its gentle patter dulling the song of the little stream. The studio windows were open at Miles's elbow, and now and then a raindrop splashed against his cheek. The baby nasturtiums in the box outside danced and courtesied on their slender stalks as though from very happiness.

''What's the matter with the day?'' grunted Hunter, as his pen went creaking slowly, laboriously, on again over the paper.

''Rainy, of course.''



"What of it? Can't expect the sun to shine all the time, can you?"

"N-no, I suppose not," answered Miles.

Bistre, having turned around eight times on Miles's stomach, finally prepared for more slumber.

"I suppose, by the way," said Hunter, presently, "you'll be leaving me in a day or two?"

"Leaving you?" echoed Miles, questioningly.

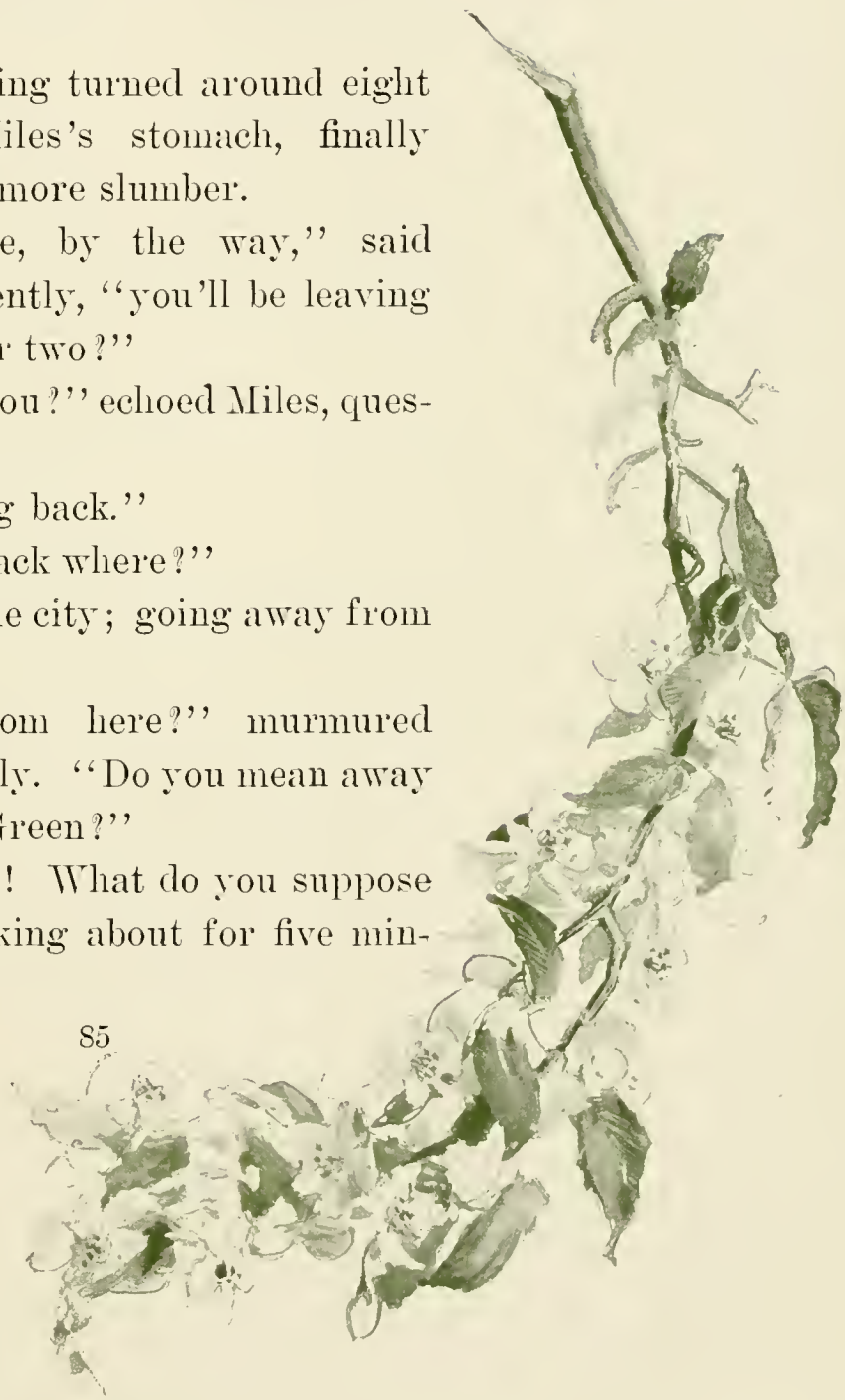
"Yes, going back."

"Back? Back where?"

"Back to the city; going away from here."

"Away from here?" murmured Miles, dreamily. "Do you mean away from Maple Green?"

"Of course! What do you suppose I've been talking about for five minutes?"



"And so you are sending me away!" mused Miles, dolefully. Hunter stared and laid down his pen again.

"Sending you away? Of course I'm not! If you care to stay——"

"Oh, it's all right," Miles assured him, sorrowfully. "If there's somebody else coming I can go, I suppose. But——"

"Who said anything about anybody coming?" asked his host, exasperatedly.

"Then you're merely tired of me?" said Miles. "I'm sure, if I'd known that earlier——"

"Oh, go to the dickens!" growled Hunter. "Stay if you want to!"

"Not where I am not wanted," replied Miles, stiffly.

"Look here!" bellowed Hunter. "When I asked you out here you

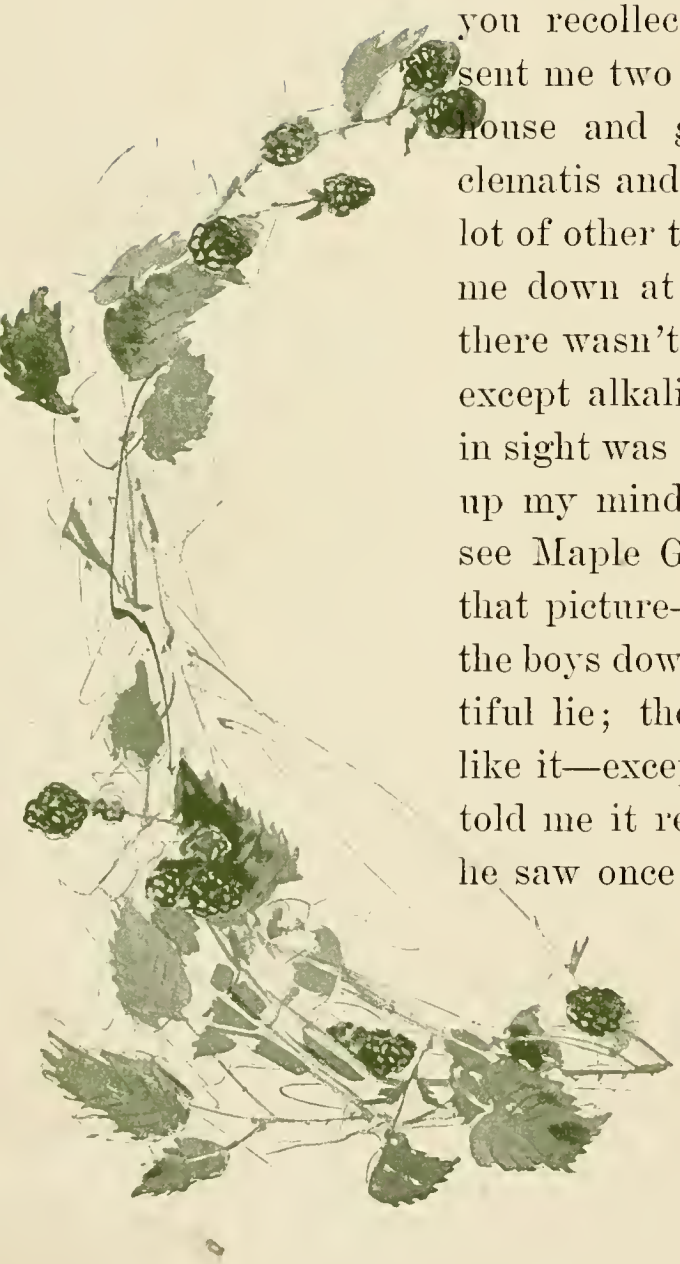
hemmed and hawed around until I thought you'd choke yourself! And then you said you'd try it for a week. Well, you've been here ten days. If you can stand it longer, I'm glad to have you, as you plaguey well know; wish you'd stay all summer. But I didn't suppose you found it very exciting here after Arizona and New Mexico and those places. If you want to stay, why—why——"

"I accept your apology," answered Miles, with dignity, "and I will stay a little longer. As for excitement, who cares for it when they have you, old man? You are a never-failing source of amusement."

The other grunted and went back to his writing. Miles winked gravely at Bistre, who had opened one eye during the discussion.

"And as for Maple Green," went

on Miles, presently, "it really isn't half bad; a bit too pastoral, perhaps; a trifle too idyllic; but still rather interesting. Fact is, I'd like to see the place when the flowers are out. Do you recollect that little picture you sent me two years ago, the one of the house and garden, with the purple clematis and crimson scrambler and a lot of other truck? Well, that reached me down at Peterson's Ranch, when there wasn't a blamed thing blooming except alkali and the only vegetation in sight was canned tomatoes. I made up my mind then that some day I'd see Maple Green when it looked like that picture—if it ever did! Most of the boys down there said it was a beautiful lie; they'd never seen anything like it—except 'Slim' Cooper; 'Slim' told me it reminded him of a picture he saw once that came with a Christ-



mas magazine, the London '*Graphite*,' he thought it was!''

Hunter sealed his letter and applied a stamp to the envelope with a thump that made the dishes rattle in the next room.

''Besides,'' continued Miles, ''I haven't found a wife yet. You know you said——''

''If that's all that's keeping you,'' growled his friend, ''you might as well get out. The Green doesn't offer much choice in that line.''

''Oh, I don't know,'' Miles drawled. ''There are the Ruggleses!''

''You might do worse,'' chuckled Hunter, as he lighted his pipe. ''Which one has caught your fancy?''

''Well, I'm undecided. The fact is, I haven't yet reached the point where I can tell one from the other!''

''If you like,'' Hunter suggested,

"we'll drop in this afternoon and you can look 'em over."

"Heaven forbid!" cried Miles.

After luncheon Hunter fixed himself comfortably in two chairs with a volume of Victor Hugo. (Hugo and Dumas were the only novelists he ever read, if we except Miles.) His guest, after repeated attempts to interest himself in a magazine, donned a raincoat and, with the devoted Bistre at heel, went out for a walk. It still rained, but more gently, and in the east patches of blue sky appeared now and then behind the gray clouds. Miles turned toward the settlement. The road was empty save for a farmer's wagon just turning into a distant lane. It occurred to him that possibly at the Maple Tree Inn they sold cigars. Not that he smoked cigars very often, but there was no

harm in having a few on hand. But when in front of the little stone cottage occupied by the Misses Ruggles he suddenly changed his mind.

Glancing up he caught sight of a face at one of the windows. He doffed his cap. The next instant he realized that he had bowed to neither Miss Veridian nor Miss Anamife; that, in short, the face at the window had been that of the Princess. But already he was past the gate. To return now would look awkward at the least. No, he would continue his walk, return, and call on the Misses Ruggles. He had taken tea with them and it was his duty to call. So on he went, with Bistre trotting along behind, as far as the little green-shingled studio where lived the uninteresting Jenkins. There he turned and retraced his steps, striving heroically not to run.

At the white-painted door with its shining brass eagle knocker he made Bistre understand that he was to remain outside, and then demanded admittance. It was Miss Veridian that answered his knock; or it may have been Miss Anamite; Miles refused to commit himself. He addressed her as "Miss Ruggles" in quite his most winning manner, said he'd dropped in to beg a cup of the nectar which they dispensed under the name of tea, and in a moment found himself, divested of rain-coat and cap, in the little old-fashioned parlor. The Misses Ruggles were manifestly pleased and flattered. Miss Anamite—or it may have been Miss Veridian—fluttered feverishly to the tea-table, in spite of the fact that it was but three o'clock, and fluttered quite as feverishly out of the room bearing the gleaming kettle.

Miles glanced at the windows and then about the room. His heart sank. He was alone with Miss Veridian—or it may have been Miss Anamite. She sat opposite him, very straight, on the edge of a fiddle-back mahogany chair, her slim white hands crossed in her lap, and beamed coyly.

"Oh, Mr. Fallon," she said, "I do wish you might have come a moment earlier, just a wee moment earlier! We've had a call from such a dear girl! I'm certain you would have been charmed!"

"Indeed?" answered Miles, striving to keep the disappointment he felt out of his voice. "I'm sorry I didn't, Miss Ruggles. The—ah—the young lady has gone?"

"Scarcely two minutes ago, Mr. Fallon. Not more than two minutes, I think, my dear?" This to Miss—

well, to the other Miss Ruggles, who had wafted in with the kettle.

"Oh, surely not so long ago as that, dear," was the reply. "Perhaps a minute, Mr. Fallon. One is so liable to err, I think, in the matter of estimating time, Mr. Fallon. Very often one says a minute, meaning in reality a much shorter period."

"My dear!" murmured the other Miss Ruggles.

"Oh, quite unconsciously, so to speak, with no intention of deceiving! It is only that sixty seconds is so much more protracted a space of time than we realize, my dear." She lighted the alcohol lamp and seated herself beside the table, looking across at Miles with an expression of arch excitement. "There is such an interesting experiment one may try, Mr. Fallon."

"Indeed?" murmured Miles, smiling interestedly.

"Really! You take a watch——"

"Your own watch," interpolated the other Miss Ruggles.

"Of course, your own watch, my dear! You take a watch, and you ask some one else to count the seconds up to sixty."

"The other person doesn't see the watch," explained her sister.

"No—that is, not the *face* of the watch, my dear. Of course, there is no harm if the other person sees the *back* of the watch! Then you begin when the second-hand is at sixty and the other person counts one, two, three, and so on until he——"

"Or she," suggested the other Miss Ruggles.

"Or she, of *course*, my dear. Until he or she reaches sixty. You'd really

be surprised, Mr. Fallon, to find how seldom the person who is counting estimates correctly the duration of a minute! They usually get through long before the second-hand has completed its circuit. It is really a most interesting experiment!"

"Most interesting!" murmured the other Miss Ruggles.

"It must be," said Miles, politely. "I shall have to try it some time."

The lady at the tea-table fingered the watch on the bosom of her brown silk waist tremulously. The other Miss Ruggles frowned. The fingers fell away and the face bent over the kettle to hide the blush that crept over it.

"But you haven't told me yet," said Miles, "the identity of the charming young lady."

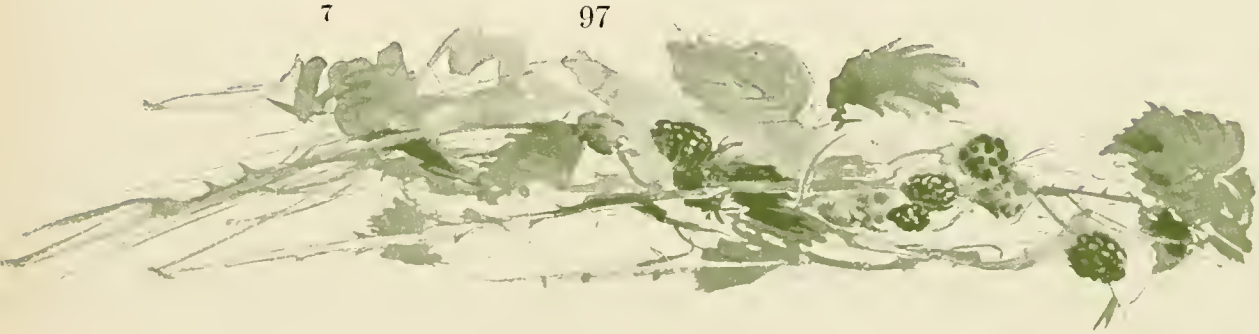
"Why, so I haven't!"

"How odd!" The Misses Ruggles looked at each other bewilderedly. The one at the tea-table shook her head smilingly.

"I fear you are growing forgetful, Anamite dear," she sighed. Miles examined the other Miss Ruggles in the hope of discovering some feature whereby he could thereafter identify her as Miss Anamite. But it was no use; five minutes afterwards he was as much at sea as ever. Meanwhile, Miss Anamite was explaining.

"It was Miss Lynde," she said. "Such a sweet girl! So—so interesting! She's an artist, a landscape artist, with a great deal of talent. Shouldn't you say she had a great deal of talent, dear?"

"Oh, undoubtedly, my dear! A most talented girl, Mr. Fallon! Quite remarkable, I call her!"



"Miss Lynde," repeated Miles, as though searching his memory.

"Yes, quite a beautiful girl, with wonderful golden hair. Do say you have met her, Mr. Fallon!"

Miss Anamite—or *was* it Miss Anamite?—clasped her hands ecstatically and viewed Miles in strained suspense.

"Well, of course, I may have met a Miss Lynde; in fact, I am almost certain that I have; a Miss—ah—Mary Linde, I think."

He waited craftily.

"No, you haven't met her then. But you must, positively you must! She is staying at the Inn. If you do meet her"—Miss Anamite Ruggles positively giggled!—"if you do, I'm almost sure we shall have a romance at Maple Green!" She beamed excitedly at her sister.

"Yes, indeed, a romance!" echoed the other Miss Ruggles.

"You have certainly aroused my curiosity," replied Miles, gravely. "I shan't rest until I have seen this charming young person. I shall haunt the Inn, I think, until my eyes are rewarded with sight of her."

The Misses Ruggles found that excruciatingly humorous, and viewed each other delightedly.

"So clever," sighed one Miss Ruggles, admiringly.

"Such refreshing humor," sighed the other.

And at that moment the tea-kettle boiled over and, with subdued exclamations of dismay, both Miss Ruggles flew to the rescue of the embroidered table-cloth.

When, half an hour later, Miles reached the studio, his host awoke

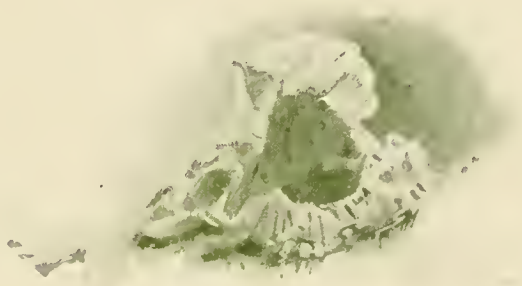
with a mighty yawn and glanced at the clock.

"Where the dickens have you been all the afternoon?" he asked.

"You won't laugh if I tell you?" said Miles.

"Laugh? Why should I laugh?"

"Why shouldn't you? I've been taking tea with the Ruggleses."



VI

This morning the world was ablaze with sunshine.

When he had left the studio, Miles had attributed the fact to the undimmed presence of the sun; but now, as he stood beneath the last tree at the summit of the little slope, holding back the branches in each hand lest they give warning of his approach, he pitied himself for his stupidity. The world was ablaze with sunshine because the Princess wore no bonnet.

She had placed her easel nearer the tinkling brook and was facing obliquely the opposite rise of lush, dew-gemmed grass, and the rim of low-

spreading apple-trees. Her back was toward him, and, with a warning gesture to Bistre, Miles stood there a moment to view—the scenery. Overhead fluffs and ribbons of creamy-white clouds sailed about on a sea of blue, wafted by a prankish breeze from the south. Under the trees the ground was splashed with pink as a result of yesterday's rain, and now and then a breeze, swaying the branches lazily, sent little showers of petals floating through the air. The world was fresh and clean and damp, and sweet with the odor of blossoms and of drenched foliage. The sunlight was flashed back from millions of gems in rays of all colors. Chrysoprases and tourmalines gleamed from the swaying grass-blades, pink pearls and opals shimmered from the trembling blossoms, emeralds and topazes were strung

along the young branches, diamonds —faintly blue or crystal-white—scintillated from fairy webs. The morning was aglitter and agleam, musical with the songs of birds and bees and heady with the fragrance of spring.

"The gold of the April sunshine,
The sweet of the April breeze,
The bluebird's note in yonder wood,
The droning of the bees,"

quoted Miles under his breath. "And there is the Princess," he went on, with a throb at his heart, "the Orchard Princess, with cheeks like the apple-tree blooms, eyes like the blue sky, and hair that is golden sunlight. And I—heigho! I might as well have fallen in love with nature herself; she would have proved kinder, I fear, than the Princess!"

Then he snapped his fingers to Bistre and went on down the slope.

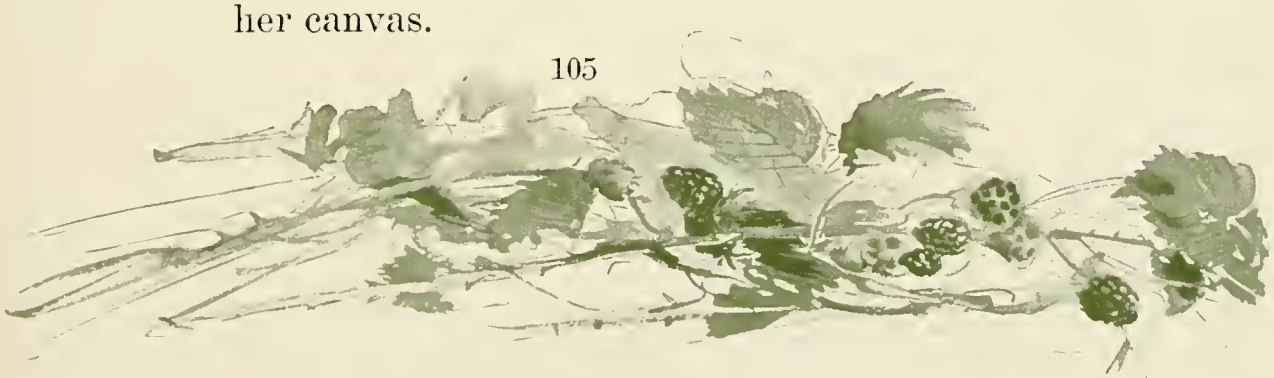
As before, she was all in white,—white as fresh and clean as the April morning itself. The sleeves of her waist were pushed back to her elbows and the slim, rounded arms gleamed like new ivory. A white linen stock was about her neck and the ends were thrown over one shoulder. The white skirt had been turned up across her knees, away from the wet grass, and from beneath the lace of the underskirt two slender, tan-clad ankles moved restlessly. She was painting busily in an effort to catch the tender tints of early morning, and her brush flew eagerly from palette to canvas and from canvas to palette. The blue-checked painting apron had fallen unnoticed from her lap, her cheeks were flushed a deeper pink by the little tur-

moil of excitement, and her hair, rising in a wave of gold from her forehead and clustering low upon her neck in thick strands, outshone the sunlight.

Miles reached her side unheard and unseen, and paused there with a sudden little gasp for breath. Her beauty assailed him with almost a physical shock, and for a moment, as his eyes dwelt on the oval cheek with its creamy flush, on the scarcely parted lips, on the little ear shadowed in golden twilight, his heart performed strange antics. And when he spoke his voice fluttered absurdly.

"You are early this morning," he said.

She turned with a swift glance—that and no more—and bent again to her canvas.



"Oh, please!" she whispered, tensely. "Just a moment!"

Miles drew back. Even Bistre, sniffing for attention, understood, and sat down to wait patiently for caresses. For a long minute the brush flew here and there in short, telling strokes of fresh, vivid green. Then the girl paused, sighed, leaned back, and, with a tiny start of recollection, turned to Miles. Her eyes, wide with fervor, looked into his for an instant questioningly. Then,—

"Oh!" she said. Down fluttered the white sleeves, a slim hand sought her hair, and in some mysterious way the white skirt dropped decorously to the ground. "I—I didn't hear you come," she said.

"No, you were very intent on your canvas." In spite of his efforts, his tone held a suggestion of grievance.

"I hope I haven't done any damage?"

The golden head shook slowly.

"No, I am through for to-day; there is no more I can do. If I could have had just another half-hour, another ten minutes!" she said, wistfully.

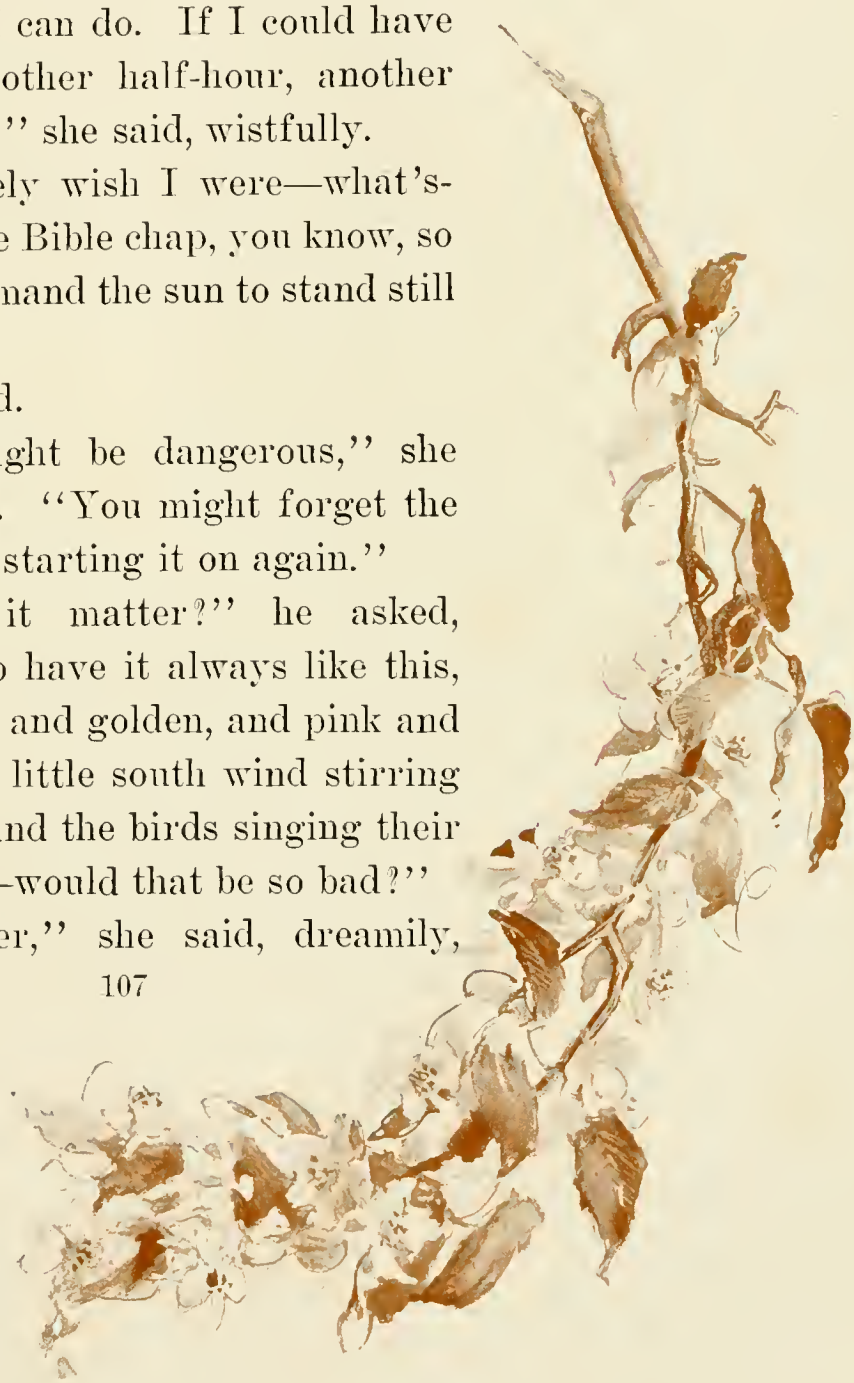
"I sincerely wish I were—what's-his-name, the Bible chap, you know, so I might command the sun to stand still for you."

She smiled.

"That might be dangerous," she said, lightly. "You might forget the formula for starting it on again."

"Would it matter?" he asked, softly. "To have it always like this, fresh, green and golden, and pink and blue, with a little south wind stirring the leaves, and the birds singing their hearts out,—would that be so bad?"

"I wonder," she said, dreamily,



looking down the glade, where the sunlight flashed dazzlingly on the ripples of the brook. "I wonder! It is beautiful, isn't it? The world seems a glorious place, doesn't it? All sweetness and softness and goodness, with never a pain nor a trouble. And yet, wouldn't we tire very soon? Wouldn't we sigh for gray days and—and—the rain? Yesterday, too, was beautiful."

"I didn't fancy it," said Miles, decisively. "It was forty-eight hours long and—and the tea was bitter."

The girl bent farther over Bistre, who was having his head rubbed, and Miles could not see her face.

"That was rather a shabby trick you played me," he continued, aggrievedly.

"I?" she asked, without looking up.

"You," answered Miles, sternly. "You decoyed me into the Ruggles'

studio, and then meanly, heartlessly left me to the mercies of Miss Anamite and Miss Veridian. And I drank three cups of tea that I didn't want. I think I was hypnotized."

"They are very charming," said the girl.

"But—but it was unkind, now, wasn't it?"

"To make you drink tea you didn't want?" she asked, innocently, looking up at him.

"To run away as you did."

"I don't think so. Pray, Mr. Fallon, how was I to know that you were going to call? When I saw you, you were passing by."

Miles's courage was not equal to the situation. Somehow the words which came to him did not seem just the ones to say to this girl.

"Well," he said, weakly, "I sup-

pose you couldn't know; but I wish you had; perhaps you'd have stayed —out of compassion. Would you, do you think?''

''No,'' she answered, shaking her head lightly, ''I don't think I would.''

''Then you are not compassionate?''

Again came that little cruel shrug of the slim shoulders.

''I really don't know,'' she answered, as though the subject failed to interest her. She reached out with the toe of one tan shoe and closed the lid of the battered paint-box.

''You—you're not going so early?'' asked Miles, anxiously.

''Yes, I am through for to-day.''

''But—but what's the use? You won't find a pleasanter spot than this, surely, Miss Lynde. And—the fact is —I've got something awfully important to say—or do.''

The eyebrows arched themselves in polite surprise.

"Really?" she asked. "Something important? I'm sure I can't imagine what it is."

"Then stay just a little while and learn, won't you? Since I've had such extraordinary good luck as to—er—stumble on you this morning——"

She laughed maliciously.

"You are a poor fibber, Mr. Fallon," she said.

"No one ever called me that before," he replied. "In fact, I've always flattered myself that I was—well, rather good at lying."

"Then you aren't sustaining your reputation this morning," she answered, gravely. "You see, I happened to notice you on your porch when Miss Veridian asked where I was going and I told her."

"Oh," said Miles, lamely. "Was—er—was that Miss Veridian?"

"Yes," the girl answered, soberly. But a little smile flickered at the corners of her mouth, and Miles took heart.

"Well, I confess," he said, "and throw myself on the mercy of the court. I followed you."

"The court acquits you on your promise never to do it again."

"I won't promise. I prefer to be held in custody—by the court."

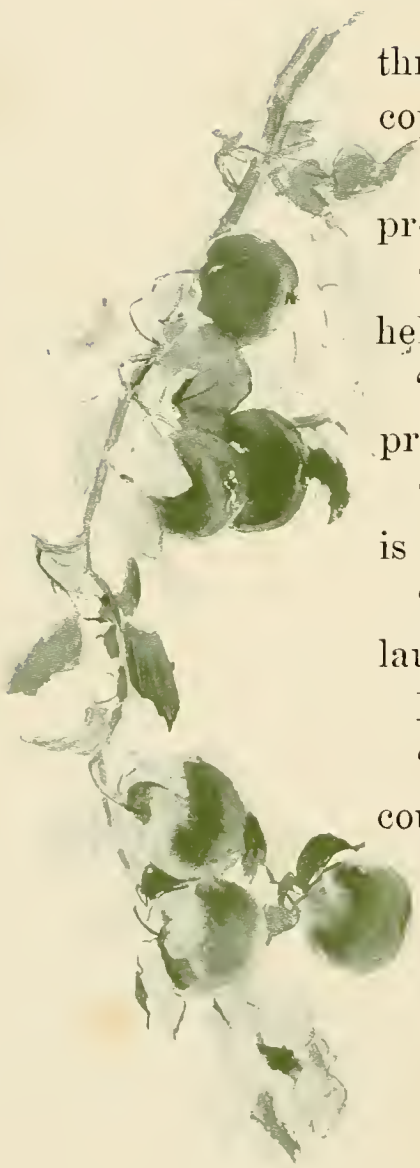
"Then you'll have to go to—to prison!"

"Is it as bad as that? And where is the prison?"

"The Ruggleses," she answered, laughingly.

He shuddered.

"I throw myself on the mercy of the court!"



"You've already done that once," she remonstrated. "The mercy of the court is worn out. To prison you go, Mr. Fallon! And you are sentenced to a week of tea and cakes!"

"It would be far more merciful to sentence me to swift death," he answered. "Please have me drawn and quartered, Miss Lynde. I ask it as the last favor!"

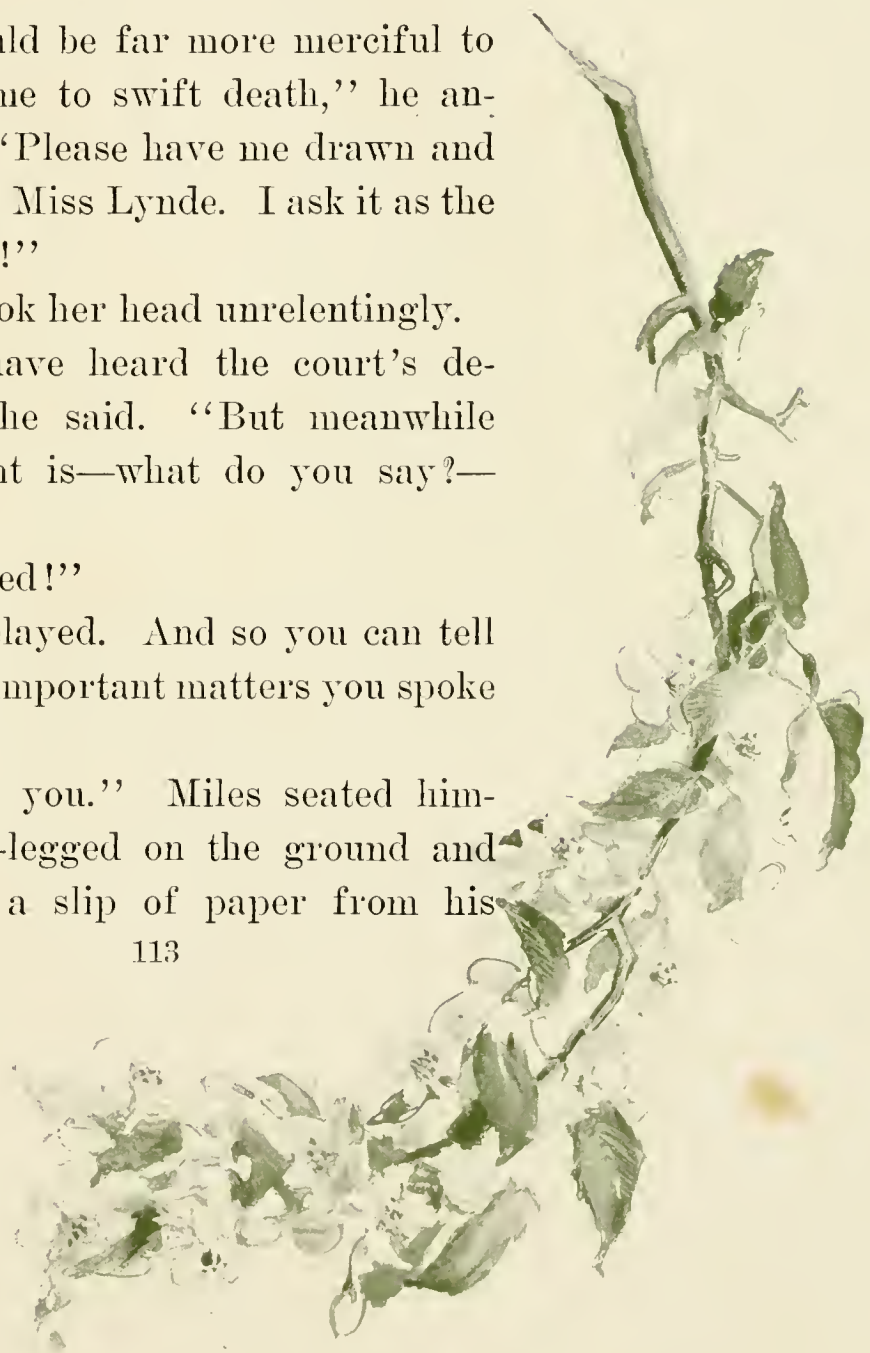
She shook her head unrelentingly.

"You have heard the court's decision," she said. "But meanwhile punishment is—what do you say?—delayed?"

"Revoked!"

"No, delayed. And so you can tell me of the important matters you spoke of."

"Thank you." Miles seated himself cross-legged on the ground and produced a slip of paper from his



pocket. "You know I told you I was going to learn your first name?"

"You said so," she answered, calmly.

"Yes; well, here I have a list, carefully copied from the back of Mr. Brough's dictionary, of all feminine names beginning with P."

"Really? You must have been dull indeed yesterday!"

"I shall read them off," continued Miles, unheeding of her sarcasm, "and you will kindly answer when your name is reached." There was no reply, and he looked up. "You will, won't you?"

"No, I think not," she said, smiling mockingly.

"But that isn't fair!"

"Isn't it?"

"Think—think of the labor I've been through!"

"Not at my suggestion."

He observed her a moment, searching the blue eyes—a not unpleasant process—for signs of relenting. He found none and turned to the paper.

"Before I begin," he announced briskly, "I should like to say that there is one name which I have been—that is, which I have mentally applied to you since I had the pleasure of meeting you a week or two ago——"

"Four days," corrected the girl, dryly.

"Which, while it may not be the title with which you were christened, suits you admirably."

"And that is?" she asked, with elaborate indifference.

"That you must guess for yourself," he answered, maliciously. "Unless, that is to say, unless you

will exchange your name for mine—I mean——!''

''It sounds like a proposal of marriage,'' she said, composedly. In spite of her self-possessed gravity, she enjoyed his confusion.

''I—I have no desire to retract it,'' he stammered, wishing his cheeks were not so red. But she shook her head.

''It would be cruel to hold you to it,'' she answered, kindly. ''Pray continue; you were saying?''

''I meant to say that I would tell you the name I have given you if you would tell me your real one.''

''I haven't sufficient curiosity,'' she replied, coldly.

''Very well, then.'' Miles went back to the paper. ''Patience?''

He looked up. Her eyes met his unflinchingly.

"Not Patience, then. Patty?"

No reply.

"Paula?"

"Pauline?"

"Penelope?"

"Persis?" He asked it hesitatingly. Then,—

"Thank Heaven!" he muttered. "Not Persis!"

A smile crept across her face.

"Phillipa? No? Thank heaven again!"

"Phœbe?"

"Phyllis?" He watched her anxiously.

"Polly? It's not so bad, Polly. No? Very well."

"Priscilla?"

She still looked back at him mockingly. He took a deep breath, and,—

"Prudence!" he whispered, tenderly.

The blue eyes flickered once and the pink deepened by just a shade in the cheeks.

"Prudence!" he said again, his voice dwelling softly, lovingly, on the word. She arose quickly to her feet.

"I am going now, if you are quite through your *important* matters!"

"Prudence!" he begged. She turned on him accusingly.

"You asked some one!" she cried.

"I didn't!" he answered, triumphantly. "I guessed it! I knew it was your name at once; something told me! Pru——"

"I forbid you to say it again!" she flashed. "It *is* my name, and you have no right to call me by it!"

"I won't," he answered, cheerfully, "now that I have found out. But—may I say that I like it, that it suits you as no other name——?"

"No, you may not," she answered, severely.

"Very well. But you will let me help you back with this stuff?" he asked, penitently.

"I don't need any assistance, thank you, Mr. Fallon."

"But it's too much for you, Miss Lynde! Please let me——"

"Please stay where you are," she replied, with dignity.

"Oh!" said Miles.

She folded the easel, took it under her arm, lifted the paint-box and canvas, and, without further notice of him, walked down the glade toward the road.

Miles stood and watched her until she was out of sight among the trees at the end of the glade. Then, with Bistre trotting sleepily along at heel, he strode home, whistling blithely.

VII

The next morning his world was nipped with frost. The Princess was very, very busy, quite too busy to look away from the canvas when he said "Good-morning." She answered in a cold, absent-minded way and went on with her work. Even Bistre seemed to feel the chill in the atmosphere and held doubtfully aloof. Miles sat down on a spot of rather wet grass at a respectful distance and filled his pipe.

"May I smoke?" he asked.

"Pray do just as you like."

"It will not annoy you?"

"Not in the least." (Strange, by the way, isn't it, how some words spell one thing and apparently mean quite another? For example, in the present case what the words really conveyed was, "Pray, sir, do you think for a moment that anything you could do

would have the power of affecting me in the least little bit?'')

"A beautiful morning?" observed Miles, most ingratiatingly. There was no reply.

"I was afraid last evening we were going to have rain." Silence.

"Er—weren't you?"

"No."

"But perhaps you didn't notice the clouds?" No answer.

"Did you?"

"No."

"It looked—er—quite threatening. But the sunset was certainly *wano*." More silence.

"You noticed the sunset, of course?"

"No—yes!"

"Then perhaps——"

"Mr. Fallon, I am very busy, and talking disturbs me."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Lynde."

Miles frowned over his pipe, glancing furtively from time to time at the provoked Princess. There was a good deal of color in her cheeks this morning, and the little droop of the lips was emphasized; but at the same time the straight nose looked extremely haughty and a tiny crease which was stationed above it, like a signal indicating stormy weather, made Miles uneasy. He wished she wasn't angry with him. Then he wondered why she was angry. Finally he decided that she had no reason for being angry; as he was inexperienced in such matters, he did not understand that a woman has the privilege of being angry without reason. Really, he told himself, he had done nothing out of the way; it was quite absurd; he would put an end to it!

"If I have done anything to displease you, Miss Lynde," he announced, with dignity, "I am very sorry. I assure you I had no intention of—of doing it."

"You haven't, Mr. Fallon." The tone was frightfully polite. Miles's frown deepened.

"I gathered from your manner that I had."

"Not at all."

"Oh!"

The birds trilled and fluttered amidst the trees. The tireless bees sang their sleepy tune. Bistre, hunting squirrels down near the road, barked impatiently. But in spite of these sounds, the silence seemed oppressive. Miles's frown grew into a scowl. He arose.

"I fear my presence annoys you, Miss Lynde," he said, coldly. There

was a slight uplifting of her eyebrows which might have meant most anything disagreeable. "I am sorry. Good-morning."

"Good-morning," said Prudence, pleasantly, without looking around at him. He had taken a dozen steps up the slope when she called to him.

"Mr. Fallon."

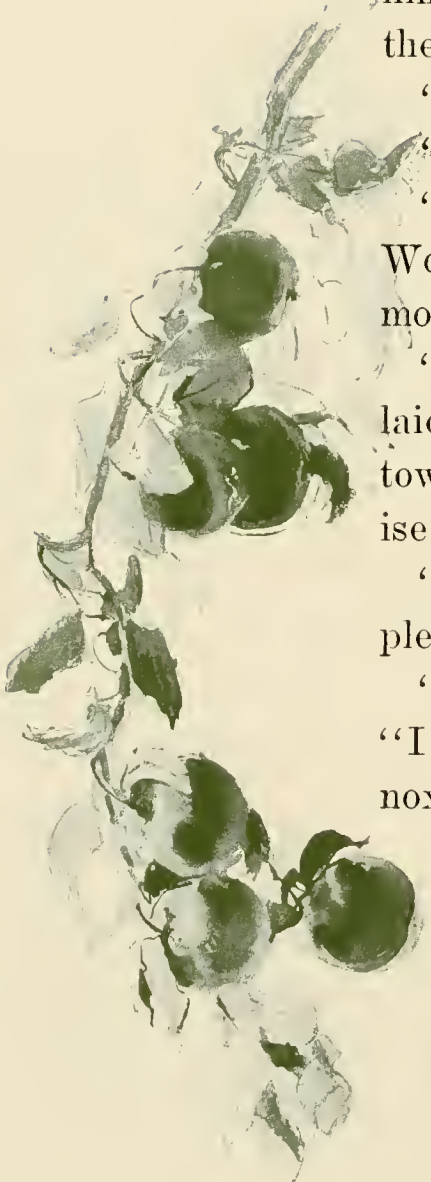
"Miss Lynde?"

"There is something I want to say. Would you mind waiting just a moment?"

"Not at all," he murmured. She laid down her brush and turned toward him. Her face held no promise of pardon.

"I want to ask you if you won't please stop—coming here."

"Certainly," he answered, coldly. "I regret that my presence is so obnoxious."



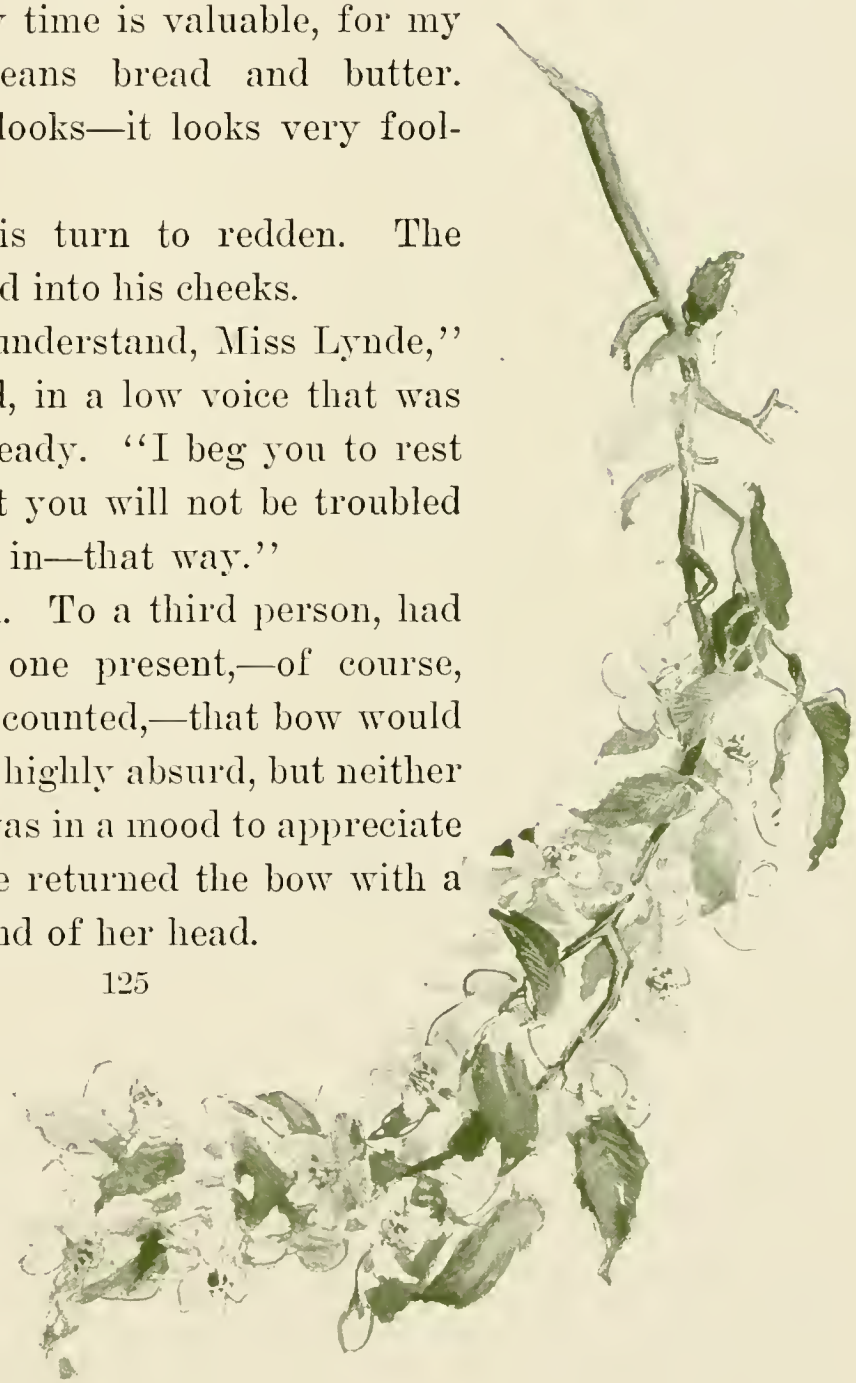
The color deepened in her face.

"That," she replied, calmly, "has nothing to do with it. If you wish to waste your time that is your own affair, but my time is valuable, for my painting means bread and butter. Besides, it looks—it looks very foolish."

It was his turn to redden. The flames leaped into his cheeks.

"I quite understand, Miss Lynde," he answered, in a low voice that was not quite steady. "I beg you to rest assured that you will not be troubled any further in—that way."

He bowed. To a third person, had there been one present,—of course, Bistre isn't counted,—that bow would have looked highly absurd, but neither he nor she was in a mood to appreciate humor. She returned the bow with a dignified bend of her head.



"Please don't misunderstand me," she said. "I lay no claim to this spot, of course, and were you a painter—if you came here to work—I would have no objection to offer. But as it is, as this particular locality means no more to you than any other——"

"No more," echoed Miles, politely.

"And as there are so many other places quite as attractive——"

"Fully as attractive," agreed Miles.

"I think I am—justified in asking you to—to cease coming, at least while I am here."

"You are quite within your rights, Miss Lynde. Believe me, I shall respect them carefully. Good-morning, Miss Lynde."

"Good-morning, Mr. Fallon."

Of course, it was all absolutely ridiculous, but to Miles, pushing his way through the apple-blooms to-

ward the lane, puffing savagely at an empty pipe, and with his cheeks afire, it didn't seem so. It was very tragic.

That evening he announced his intention of going back to the city. Hunter Brough took his pipe from his mouth, examined it attentively for a moment, and said,—

"Suit yourself, Miles. I'd ask you to stay, but I don't believe I could stand you many days in your present condition. I don't know what in thunder is the matter with you, and you won't tell me, but——"

"Why should there be anything the matter with me?" demanded Miles, crossly.

"Give it up, my boy. But there is. When a man walks around the shop all day like a caged bear and growls like one there must be something wrong.

And it must be either one of two things; either he's in love——''

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Miles.

"Well, I don't suppose it's that, for you haven't been near the Ruggleses' place for two days, so far as I'm aware, and unless you've been doing the Narcissus act and falling in love with your own reflection——''

"Oh, cut it out!" said Miles, wearily.

"Very well, it isn't that, then. So it must be your liver. If you'll just do as I told you and take a few of those pills, you'll be all right. I dare say it's living so much down there in the Southwest. That's a bad place for livers, I've heard. I used to know a chap who was in the cavalry down at Fort——''

But his auditor had flown.

Presently Hunter followed him out

on to the porch with his guitar. Miles looked desperately from his host to the instrument. Then,—

"Hunter," he announced, sombrely, "if you play that damned thing I'll—I'll strangle you!"

The next morning at breakfast Hunter looked across from the letter he was reading and asked,—

"By the way, what train are you thinking of taking?"

"None," answered Miles, cheerfully.

"Oh! I understood you to say yesterday——"

"Of course you did, but don't let it bother you. I don't. I've changed my mind."

"Oh, you've changed your mind?"

"Exactly; one can do that, I suppose?"

"Some folks can—quite often,"

answered the artist, with a basso chuckle.

"You be hanged!" muttered Miles. "Pass the omelet."

"Maybe if you were kind of careful about what you ate for a day or two your liver——"

"There's nothing the matter with my liver," answered Miles, impatiently. Hunter shook his head.

"I'm not so sure. You didn't eat any luncheon to speak of yesterday, and not much supper, and I've noticed——"

"You notice a whole lot that you can't see."

"All right, my boy. Anyhow, I'm glad you've found your appetite again."

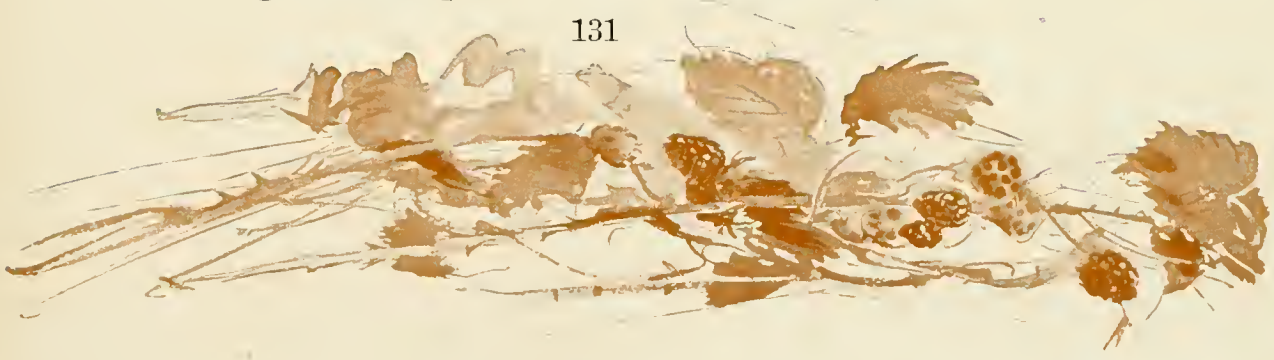
"I haven't," said Miles.

"Oh, haven't you?"

"No, I haven't. And let me advise

you, Hunter, not to try sarcasm; it doesn't suit you; when you attempt it you remind me of an elephant trying to waltz. Is there any more coffee there?''

After all, reflected Miles, as he set forth aimlessly along the road after breakfast, after all, there was no good reason why the vagaries of a girl he had never seen until a few days ago should cut short his visit to Hunter Brough. He had told Hunter he would stay, and it wouldn't be fair to disappoint him. Besides, Maple Green was far pleasanter than the city. As for Miss Lynde—well, she had been nothing to him a week ago, so why should he allow her to trouble him now? It was bally nonsense, that's what it was! Any fellow that would let a yellow-haired girl with pink cheeks and blue eyes



make him miserable must be plumb locoed!

By which time he had reached the lane.

Bistre turned in unhesitatingly. Miles paused. Of course, he had no idea of trespassing on that forbidden territory; still, merely to walk through the orchard and have a look around was not prohibited. Perhaps, after all, she was not there this morning.

But she was. When he reached the edge of the trees he saw her at her easel, her golden hair agleam in the morning sunlight. Half screened by the blossom-laden branches, he stood and looked down at her. And as he looked she laid aside her brush and, taking her chin into the curled palm of one white hand, sat looking past her canvas for all the world as though the

light was not growing every instant and the precious moments wasting away. Plainly, work did not go very well this morning! And as Miles watched he wondered why he had ever entertained the idea of tearing himself away from—Hunter!

Presently, with a start, Prudence turned again to the canvas, picked the brush from the ledge of the easel, and set to work. But there was none of the enthusiasm she had shown when the picture was started. The brush moved slower and slower until once more she was idle, her gaze on the blue rim of the distant hills seen at the end of the glade. Suddenly Miles turned his observation from the Princess to Bistre. The latter was half-way down the slope, trotting toward Prudence with his stump of a tail wagging excitedly.

"Bistre!" whispered Miles, hoarsely. "Bistre, come back here, you fool dog!"

But the fool dog didn't hear, or, hearing, paid no heed. Miles crept back out of sight among the trees and watched through a crevice in the foliage. Bistre trotted straight to Prudence and pawed at her dress. Prudence turned sharply to him and then swept the slope swiftly with her gaze. Probably she was relieved to find no one in sight. She raised the delighted Bistre on to the lap of her white skirt and kissed the beauty spot. For several minutes Bistre listened attentively to her remarks and luxuriated in her caresses. Then he jumped to the ground and came dutifully back up the slope, Prudence watching him.

Miles had flown.

VIII

The next morning when the Princess crept through the breach in the wall where the brook goes gurgling under the road and, with easel, paint-box, and canvas, began the ascent of the glade she met with a shock. There, not a dozen feet from her chosen spot, was an easel, and in front of the easel was a man. He wore a brown velvet jacket, a dark blue beret sat rakishly over one ear, and a cloud of smoke hung about his head. Prudence's heart sank. She had hoped to finish

her canvas this morning while the bright weather continued, but now she was tempted to turn back. She did not feel like talking "shop" with the unknown painter. She wondered at the chance which had led him to this particular spot. Perhaps, though, he had painted here before. His back was toward her and she could not catch even a glimpse of his face. She was certain it was not Mr. Taft, nor Mr. Link, nor yet Mr. Simpkins. But one or two new-comers had been rumored of at the Inn, and perhaps the usurper was one of these. She set down her paint-box to rest her arm and untied the strings of her sun-bonnet to allow the little breeze to reach her flushed cheeks.

But what an uninteresting view he had selected! He had placed his easel where only a shadowed group of

apple-trees confronted him, without contrast of light and shade. Perhaps, she thought ruefully, he was Farrel, the man who painted masses of unrelieved green foliage and called his productions "schemes." He was an odious little man with a yellow Vandyke beard, who talked steadily about himself and his work as long as there was any one to listen. Prudence turned irresolutely toward the road again. But the next glance told her that the man in front of her was far too broad-shouldered for Farrel. In fact, there was something dimly familiar about that back, in spite of the brown velvet. And while she struggled with memory the man leaned back in front of his untouched canvas, waved a mahl-stick gayly back and forth, and sang in time to it in a fairly good tenor,—

"The Bachelor! The Bachelor!
Te ti de dum te de!
Whose cares are few, whose friends are true,
Whose peace holds—tra-la-le!"

A flood of warm color rushed into the Princess's face and a smile chased away the expression of doubt. She stood for a moment watching the mahl-stick wave and the blue smoke go writhing up in the sunlight. And as she looked, as though to dispel any lingering doubt as to the identity of the person at the easel, Bistre trotted into sight with lolling tongue and cast himself down at the man's feet. Prudence took up her paint-box and went on.

"God bless the jolly Bachelor,
Who's ever blithe and gay;
Who, when he won't, my lad, he don't,
And when he would, he——"

The song broke off abruptly and Miles, upsetting his canvas stool, bowed politely.

"Good-morning," he said. "What a charming day for our work!"

Prudence, conquering her desire to laugh, returned his salutation with a little bend of her head.

"Allow me!" cried Miles. She silently yielded the easel, and he set it in place with much care, placed the canvas upon it, and opened her stool.

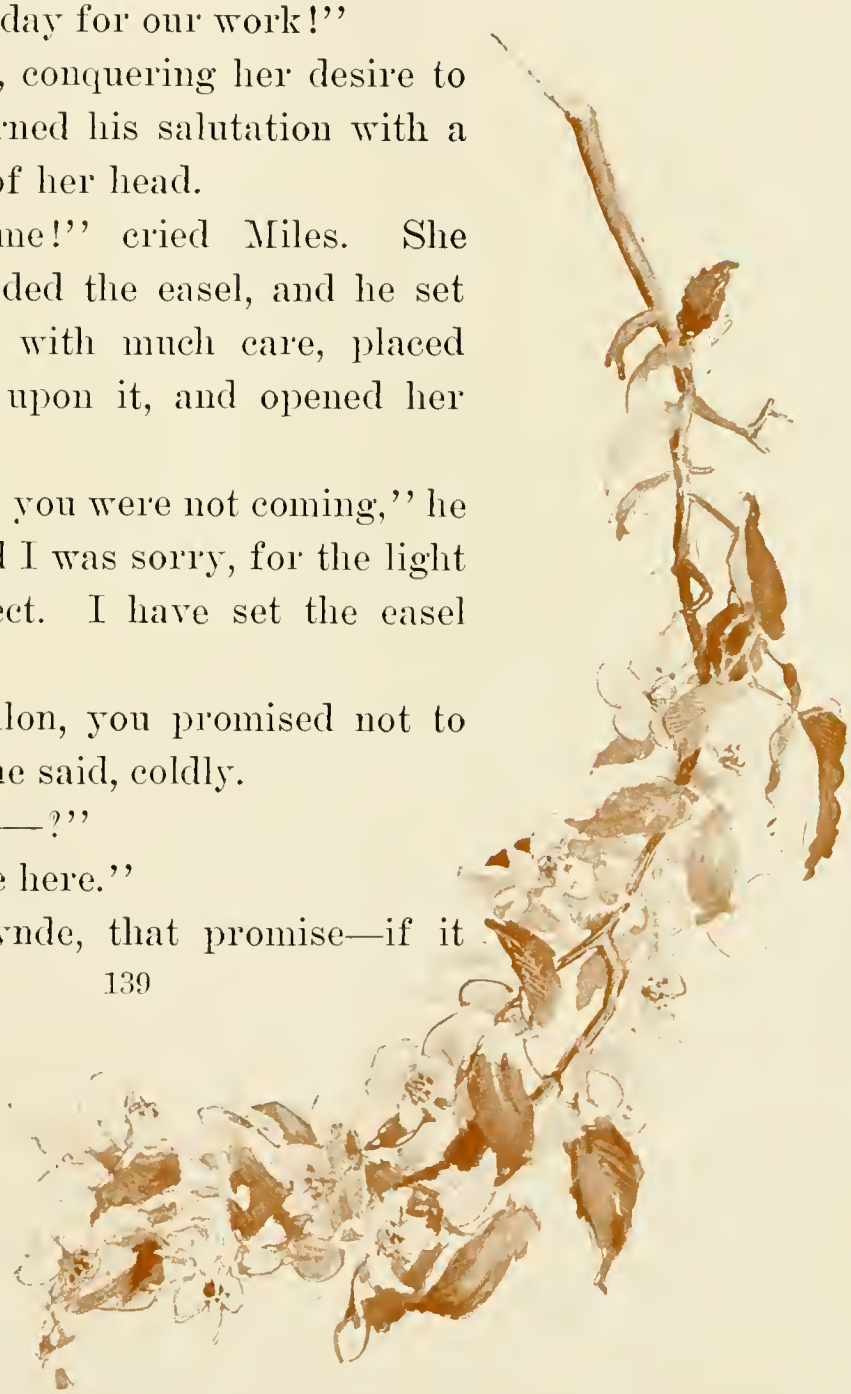
"I feared you were not coming," he said. "And I was sorry, for the light is—is perfect. I have set the easel right?"

"Mr. Fallon, you promised not to do this!" she said, coldly.

"To do——?"

"To come here."

"Miss Lynde, that promise—if it



was a promise, which I am not prepared to grant you—was made during a moment of mental aberration, and would not hold in law.''

''Indeed? And will you please tell me what you are doing with those things and that ridiculous garb?''

''Ridiculous!'' cried Miles, in hurt tones. ''Why, I rather fancied myself in these garments! To be sure, the cap was bought for a much larger head and the coat doesn't fit as well as it might across the chest; but ridiculous? You have wounded me sorely, Miss Lynde!''

''They belong to Mr. Brough?''

''They do; likewise the easel, the paint-box, the canvas, the stool, and—and the brushes. The mahl-stick is my own. I cut it from a willow tree on the way hither. Would you like to see it?''

"No, thank you, it looks rather sticky."

"It is; mahl-sticky. Thank you for smiling at that."

"I didn't smile," she denied.

"To be truthful, you didn't; but I thought you were going to, so I thanked you in advance."

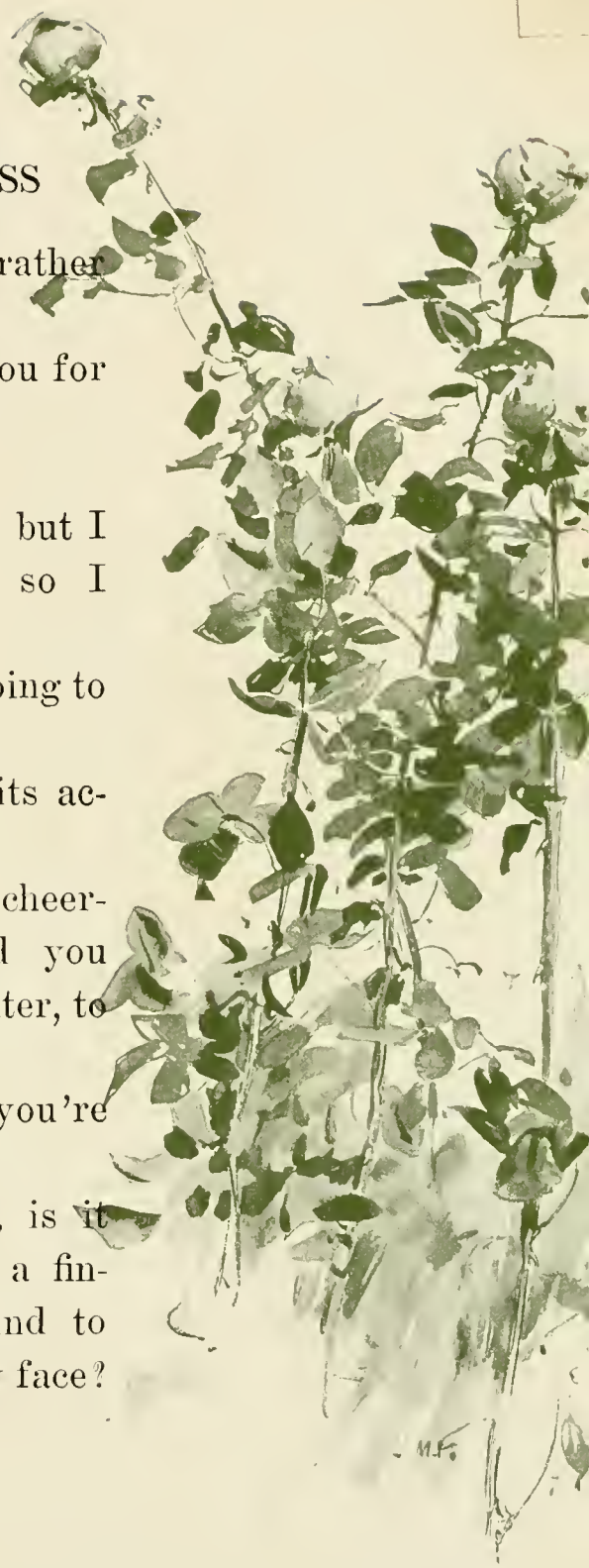
"And what, pray, are you—going to do with them?"

She indicated the easel and its accompanying articles.

"Paint," answered Miles, cheerfully. "You know you said you wouldn't object, if I were a painter, to my coming here."

"But you're not a painter; you're just pretending!"

"Miss Lynde! Is that fair, is it generous? Because I am not a finished artist like you, is it kind to throw my—my mediocrity in my face?



I am an amateur; I have never taken money for painting a picture.''

''Oh!'' she sighed, with a little reluctant laugh. ''You are incorrigible!''

''I am!'' he answered, gratefully. ''Thank you for saying so.''

She seated herself and opened her box.

''If you are going to paint,'' she said, ''don't you think you had better be about it?''

''Oh! To be sure. Thank you for reminding me; for a moment I had completely forgotten that I was a painter.''

''What are you going to do?''

''Do? Why, paint.''

''I mean what are you going to paint?'' she explained, as she set fresh color on her palette.

''Oh, I think,'' he replied, care-

lessly, "I shall do a landscape this morning. Just a little trifle, you know; something sympathetic and—and atmospheric. You see, I don't confine myself strictly to one branch of my art; sometimes I do marines. sometimes still life, sometimes flowers, quite frequently portraits; I'm rather good at portraits." He looked interestedly at the profile she presented to his view. "But this morning—well, a mere trifle of landscape, I think."

"I see," she answered, gravely. "But don't you think you could select a more interesting view than you have?"

"No," he said, thoughtfully, watching her face. "No, I rather like the view. I have seldom seen a lovelier one."

"Indeed? Apple-trees and grass in

deep shadow. Hm! How are you going to treat it?''

''I hope, Miss Lynde,'' he replied, with dignity, ''you don't think me capable of treating even a—er—landscape otherwise than courteously!''

''Well, hadn't you better begin?'' she asked, viewing her own subject with half-closed eyes.

''Perhaps I had. Um-m-m, let—me—see.'' He looked through the odds and ends contained in the discarded box. ''Do you happen to have a piece of charcoal that's not working? I seem to have omitted my charcoal this morning. I always prefer to—er—just sketch in a little before I stick on the paint.''

''Here is a piece,'' she answered. He looked rather disappointed, but arose and took it from her outstretched hand and seated himself

again before his easel. He eyed the charcoal and the canvas. Then he half closed his eyes and squinted at the apple-trees. As this didn't seem to produce the desired inspiration, he curled his fingers together as he had seen folks do in a picture gallery and looked through. "Ah," he murmured, "I think I see a tree."

Presently Prudence glanced toward him.

"Mr. Fallon, are you doing a portrait this morning?"

"Oh, no," he answered, confusedly. "A landscape."

"Then don't you think it might help you if you looked at the landscape instead of me?"

"I—I was thinking," he said, apologetically.

She looked at the empty canvas and then at him.

"No, I haven't started yet," he explained, airily. "I—I think I've lost my charcoal."

"You have it in your hand," she said, dryly.

"Why, so I have!" He looked at it in surprise. "Er—does it always come off on the fingers?"

"Generally," she replied, turning back to her work.

"I think I'll just wash my hand," he announced. "I always like to have clean hands when I start to work." He arose, followed by the attentive Bistre, and by careful management reached the brook, rinsed his hands in the water, dried them on Bistre's back, and returned to his seat. Then he lighted his pipe, consuming a deal of valuable time in the process and humming the song about the bachelor. That operation completed, he looked

thoughtfully at the canvas, stealing an occasional glance at the Princess. A quarter of an hour passed.

"How are you getting on?" asked Prudence, politely, without looking across.

"Oh, famously! I—I am almost ready to start."

"But you haven't done a thing yet!" she cried, in simulated surprise, viewing the canvas.

"No, not yet. You see, I have to wait for inspiration. Quite frequently it doesn't come for—hours!"

"Mr. Fallon," she said, sternly, "you came here on pretence of painting. If you don't paint, I must insist that you go away again."

"I don't like the sound of that word 'pretence,' " he answered, shaking his head grievedly.

"Then you must do something."

"Well," he answered, ingenuously, "what—what would you advise?"

"I'd advise you to start."

"Yes, I had thought of that," he agreed. "I suppose it might be best to start. Only—where would you start?"

"I didn't agree to give you instruction, Mr. Fallon."

"Oh, certainly not! I don't ask instruction; merely—er—advice, assistance."

"Oh, well, why not sketch in your trees there?"

"Would you?" he asked, interestedly. She nodded.

"How would you do it?"

She arose quickly and crossed the grass to him.

"Get up, please, and let me have the crayon."

He obeyed. Seating herself on the

SHE AROSE QUICKLY AND CROSSED THE GRASS TO HIM

stool, she sketched in rapidly the outline of the apple-trees, indicated the trunks and the ground with a few short strokes, and arose.

"There," she said, handing back the charcoal, "that's the way I'd do it."

"Thank you," he answered, gravely. "Now I can go to work, can't I?"

"I should think so," she answered, going back to her own canvas. "But, do you know, I think perhaps you had better stick to the other lines you affect? Landscape doesn't—I hope you won't mind my saying it, Mr. Fallon——"

"Please be perfectly candid," he begged.

"Landscape doesn't appear to be your strong point."

"I have sometimes thought that, too," he answered. "I think maybe

I'd better do a portrait this morning instead." He looked attentively at her.

"Oh, no," she replied, "I think I'd go ahead with the landscape, if I were you, now that you've got it sketched in."

"Well," he said, doubtfully. "Although my inspiration to-day seems to lean toward portraiture. Still, if you think best——"

"I do."

"Then I'll take your advice." He seated himself again on his stool, relighted his pipe, winked gravely at Bistre, and pulled the paint-box toward him by the simple expedient of putting his heel in it. "I will now," he announced calmly, "set my palette." A moment passed. Then, "Haven't got any," he murmured, surprisedly. "Bistre, I haven't got any!"

"Haven't got any what?" asked Prudence.

"Haven't got any palette," he answered, in the voice of one overwhelmed and dazed by a great calamity.

"Then I fear you won't be able to do much this morning," she said, struggling with a smile.

"No, I fear not," he answered, dolefully. "And just when I was about to do a veritable masterpiece, too! How cruelly Fate toys with us! Now, just because Hunter neglected to supply me with a palette, the world loses a great painting! I was going to call it"—he sank his voice to a confidential whisper—"I was going to call it 'Apple-Trees!' "

"A most original title!" she exclaimed, evidently quite impressed.

"Isn't it? And now—now it will

never be! And I suppose''—he spoke sorrowfully—''I suppose I shall have to go, now that I can't paint.''

Prudence laid down her brush and faced him smilingly.

''Mr. Fallon!''

''Miss Lynde?''

''You are absolutely ridiculous!''

He bowed.

''You don't keep your promises and you won't be serious. And I don't suppose there is any use in my trying to—to keep you away—from here.''

''Honestly,'' he answered, cheerfully, ''I don't believe there is.''

''Therefore, as I am through myself, I will leave you to undisputed possession of this spot you seem so fond of.''

She laid her palette and brushes in her box and arose. So did Miles. So did Bistre.

"Well, I'm through myself," said Miles. "And so, if you don't mind, I'll just walk back with you and carry your things."

"But you've got your own things," Prudence demurred.

"Those? Oh, I'll just leave those here—until to-morrow!"

IX

They took a walk that evening, Miles and Hunter and Bistre. There was a saffron glow in the west, while low in the sky hung a crescent moon, its earthward point entangled in the topmost branches of a maple-tree on the summit of the dark ridge. They paused for a moment to converse over the fence with the Misses Ruggles, who, wearing gauntleted gloves and armed with trowels, were transplanting a brood of window-grown heliotropes from pots to beds. Later they indulged in conversation *en passant* with the Tafts regarding the weather. Still further along they saw the re-

nowned Merrill Link smoking a cigar on his porch, and were cheered by a condescending bow from the great one. The uninteresting Jenkins was training a wistaria vine on to a trellis; from the Beatties' cottage issued the soft strains of Goddard's Second Waltz. Miles didn't know it was that, but it seemed of a piece with the quiet beauty of the evening and made his heart beat a little faster; and he would have lingered within sound of the piano had not Hunter drawn him forcibly on.

"It's murder," he growled. "Come on, for heaven's sake!"

"I'm glad I'm not musical," said Miles. "One's range of pleasure is so much broader if one hasn't a cultivated ear. Now I, in my ignorance, liked that."

"That's not ignorance," replied Hunter, grimly. "It's depravity."

When they reached the Maple Tree Inn they found the porch deserted, but up-stairs four windows were alight.

"Must be some one staying here," said Hunter.

"Er—yes," answered the other, absently. "I dare say."

On the way back Miles talked of the Southwest. When he cared to he could talk well, could draw graphic, colorful pictures of places and scenes, and Hunter enjoyed listening.

"Maybe this fall or winter I can manage to run down there for a month or two," said Hunter. "I suppose your invitation still holds good?"

"Surely, only——"

"Only what?"

"Well, my plans aren't quite certain," he answered. "It may be that

I'll be in the East a good deal this winter; in New York. But I dare say we can arrange for a month or so down there together."

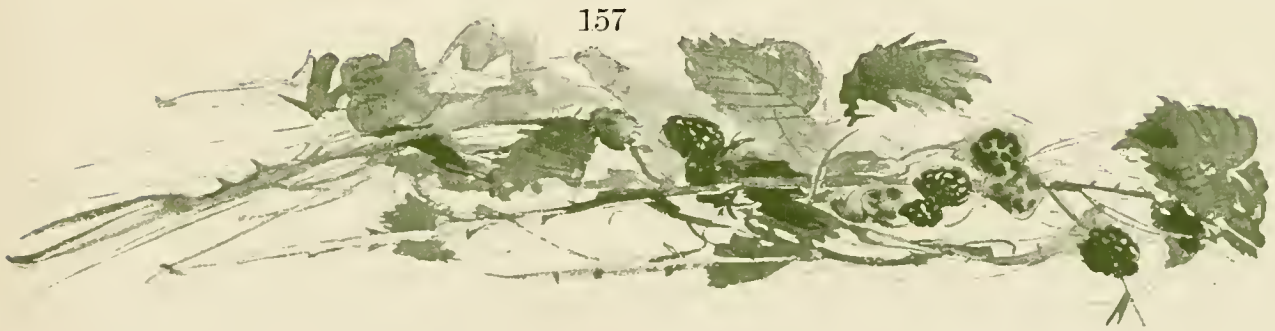
"I'd like to try my hand at that country," mused Hunter.

When they reached the studio Miles dropped on to a seat on the porch.

"Get your guitar," he suggested; and when Hunter had obeyed and had tuned it to his liking, "Sing me that thing about the wind and tide," he said.

"Wind and tide?" muttered Hunter. "Oh, yes!" His heavy fingers crept slowly over the strings, and he began, softly,—

"The world is very wide, dear,
The heavens very high,
And save the winds and tide, dear,
'Tis I alone know why,
'Tis I alone know why.



"The earth was made so grand, dear,
The heav'ns so far above,
That you might understand, dear,
How wide and deep my love,
How wide and deep my love."

When he had finished there was silence for a moment. Then Miles tapped the ashes from his pipe.

"To-morrow," he said, thoughtfully, "is the first of May."

"What about it?" asked the artist.

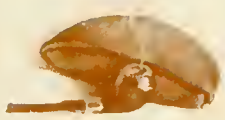
"Oh, I don't know. It seems rather wonderful, that's all."

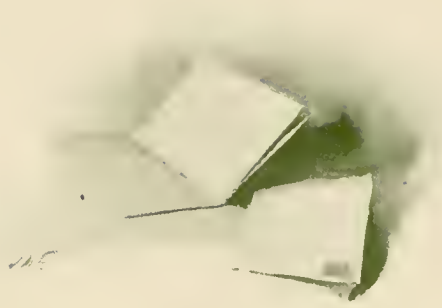
"Wonderful!" grunted the other. "Why wonderful? Doesn't it usually come at about this time of year?"

"I dare say; but I never noticed it before."

"By the way, how did you get on with your painting to-day?" asked Hunter.

"I didn't do very much," Miles answered, gravely. Then he smiled happily in the twilight. "But to-morrow!" he said, dreamily. "To-morrow——!"





X

It may have been imagination, but to Miles it seemed that Nature had put on festal attire in honor of May. Surely the birds had never sung so lustily, surely the sunlight was brighter, the leaves greener, the sky bluer than ever before. The world was in May Day mood and his heart was in tune.

He reached the glade early. The shadows were still long across the grass and the dew drenched his ankles. The easel and stool stood where he had left them, and he sat down and filled his pipe and waited. Bistre trotted busily about through the long

grass, sneezing and coughing, in search of the adventure that never befell.

The tobacco in the bowl burned down and gave place to new. The sun rose higher and higher. The shadows shortened and deepened. The song of the birds died away by degrees as noontime approached. But the Princess did not come. At eleven o'clock Miles gave up hope and, carrying his easel and stool and box, returned disappointedly to the studio. Hunter had just returned from a sketching expedition and was studying the result of his labor when Miles entered.

"Hello," he said. "Let's see the canvas."

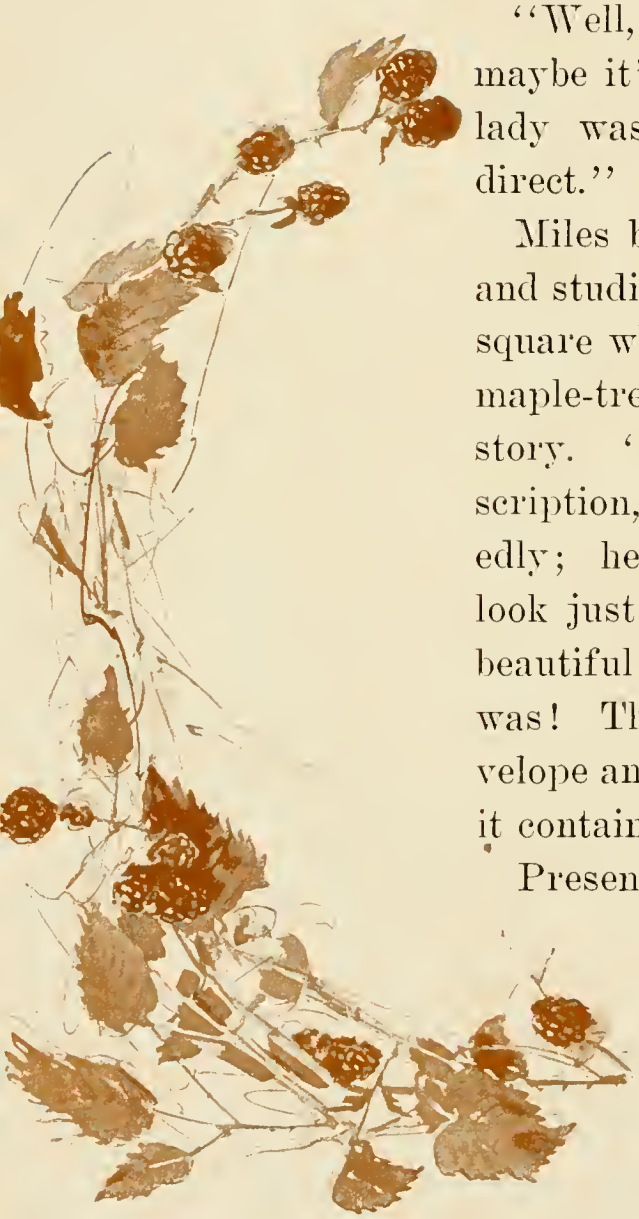
"I didn't work this morning," answered Miles, dejectedly. "The light wasn't good." Hunter chuckled.

"Too bad," he said. And then,

"By the way, there's a note there on the table for you. I found it when I came in."

"For me?" asked Miles, wonderingly.

"Well, it's addressed to you. But maybe it's meant for me; maybe the lady was too shy to write to me direct."



Miles bore the note to the window and studied it with smiling eyes. The square white envelope with the green maple-tree in the corner told its own story. "Mr. Fallon," was the inscription, and he viewed it delightedly; he had never seen his name look just like that before! And how beautiful the tall, scrawly writing was! Then he carefully slit the envelope and drew forth the single sheet it contained.

Presently Hunter, having leaned his

canvas against the wall, broke the silence.

"Well," he asked, "what is it? An invitation to tea with the Ruggleses? Or has some fair unknown fallen captive to my charms and begged you to intercede in her behalf?"

"No," answered Miles, quietly. "It's just—just a note."

He dropped it into his pocket and turned silently to the window. Hunter viewed him curiously. Presently Miles turned, took his cap from the table, and passed out. Hunter watched him leave the garden and turn westward along the road. Bistre, left on the wrong side of the door, whined dolefully.

"No, you stay here, old chap," said his master. "I don't believe you're wanted this time." He thrust his big hands into his pockets and scowled

down at the noisy little stream. "I wonder what there was in it," he muttered, "to make Miles look like that."

Meanwhile, seated on the top of a wall farther along the sunlit road, Miles was reading the note again.

"I am leaving Maple Green this morning for home. My vacation is finished. I didn't tell you this yesterday when you left me at the Inn, why, I hardly know. But this morning it seems rude to go away without saying good-bye to one of the few acquaintances I have here. And I have something else to say which is awfully difficult. Please don't try to see me again. You see I am assuming that you would have cared to do so. I may be mistaken, and I hope I am, for friends are not so many that I can drive one away without regret. I have enjoyed your acquaintance and I shall watch for your books eagerly, and shall read them with a new interest, proud to think that mine was the honor of being present at the inception of the author's first painting. I shall always feel sorry for the world since it has missed that masterpiece! But

this is nonsense and not at all what I started out to write.

"I am a very busy young person and I don't get around the world much, and so I don't think we shall meet again. But please remember, if you care to do so, that I am wishing you all sorts of success—the kind that doesn't know discouragement!—and all happiness.

"Sincerely,

"PRUDENCE LYNDE."

Miles slowly put the note back in its envelope and dropped it in his pocket. Then he sat for a long while staring bewilderedly at the dusty road. It seemed such a queer sort of thing to have happened. It had never occurred to him that he might fail. He had fallen in love with the Princess suddenly and thoroughly and with no thought as to results; it had been enough to see her and listen to her voice; there had been no looking

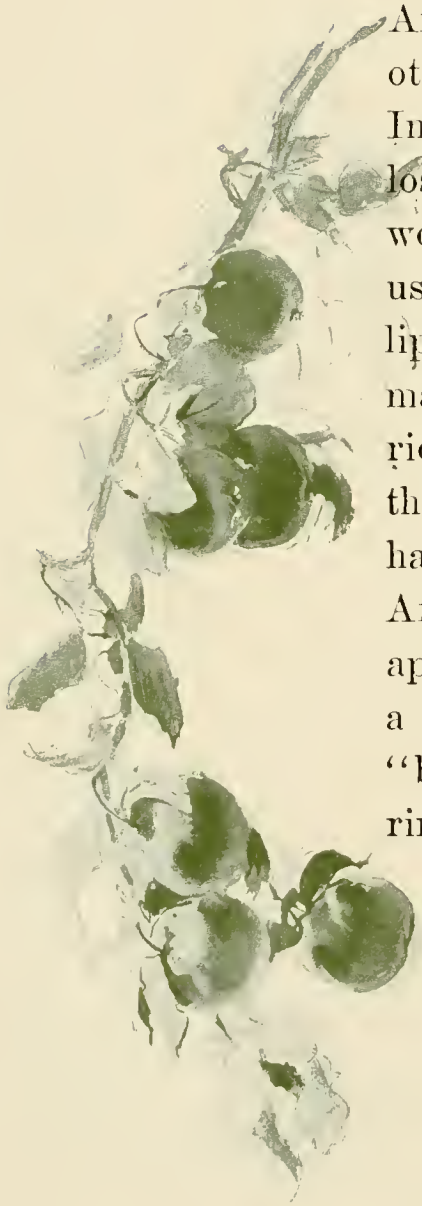
ahead, no weighing of possibilities nor probabilities. And now the iridescent bubble, blown in the sunlight, had vanished.

He strove to imagine what life was going to be without her. Of course, ultimately he would cease caring; human nature was like that; but even then, he fancied, he would always feel that he had been cheated out of something rightfully his. And until the time to cease caring came he was going to care very much. Already things were changed, he thought, wonderingly; the sunlight had faded; the blue sky no longer looked its best; the vines and bushes along the road were dusty and bedraggled like a sloven's skirt; the breeze held a chill.

If only she had left him a ray of hope, no matter how dim. Had she

forbidden him to seek her he might have disobeyed the command, accepting the consequences cheerfully. But a request was a different matter; there was no getting by that word "please!" Still, he thought, miserably, why quibble about that? The sum of it all was that to her he was merely "one of the few acquaintances!" Doubtless he had amused her—when he had not provoked her—and for that she had written him a civil note of farewell as she might have tossed a coin to a mountebank. What a fool he had been! What a silly-acting ass! As though a woman's heart could be won with jokes and grimaces!

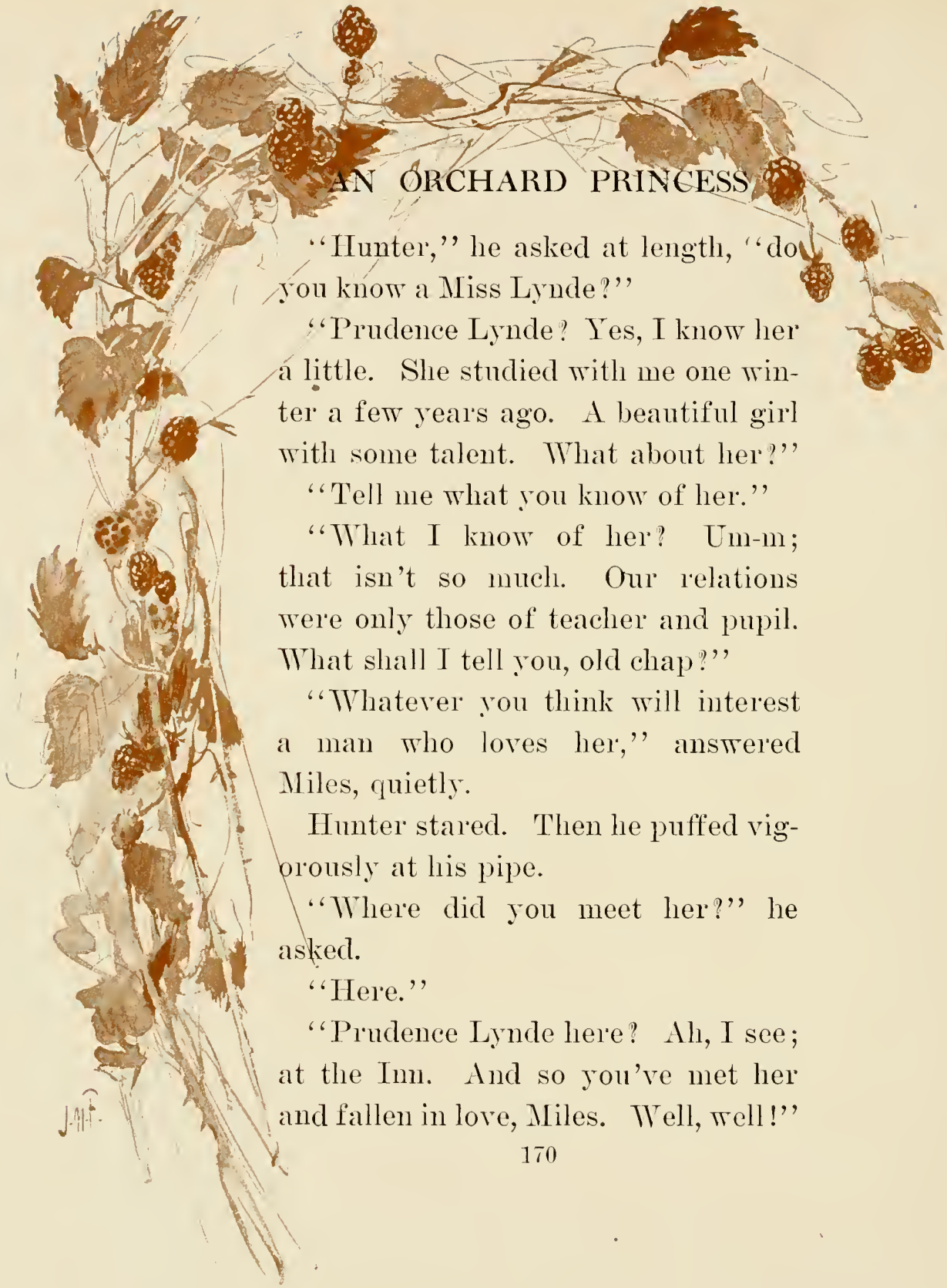
Presently he began to consider what he should do. To stay on here at Maple Green, to be reminded every instant of her, was out of the question;



the fragrance of apple-blossoms even now brought an ache to his heart; the sunlight on the trunk of the birch across the road reminded him of the gold of her hair. The first thing to do was to get away from the Green. After that——? He wondered what other men had done in like quandaries. In books they went to war or sea or lost themselves in dim corners of the world. Sometimes they were killed, usually with the girl's name on their lips; sometimes they came back after many years and found the girl unmarried or widowed and ready to fall into their arms. Miles smiled grimly. He hadn't any desire to be killed; neither Africa nor Thibet nor South America appealed to him. He supposed what a sensible man would do would be to "buck up"—to use the phrase occurring to him—and go ahead with his

work, whatever it might be, and not make a fool of himself! At all events, nothing was to be gained by grumbling at Fate.

When he got back to the studio Hunter was just sitting down to luncheon. Miles took his place at the table, trying to behave as though the very bottom of things hadn't suddenly fallen out. Hunter eyed him furtively, but asked no questions. He knew Miles pretty well. After the meal was done the two men lighted their pipes. Hunter dragged a pile of old canvases out of a cupboard and began sorting them over. Miles threw himself on the long window-seat and Bistre climbed to his lap. The nasturtiums in the box outside waved their green disks of leaves in the breeze. At last Miles sat up and scraped the tobacco from his bowl.



"Hunter," he asked at length, "do you know a Miss Lynde?"

"Prudence Lynde? Yes, I know her a little. She studied with me one winter a few years ago. A beautiful girl with some talent. What about her?"

"Tell me what you know of her."

"What I know of her? Um-m; that isn't so much. Our relations were only those of teacher and pupil. What shall I tell you, old chap?"

"Whatever you think will interest a man who loves her," answered Miles, quietly.

Hunter stared. Then he puffed vigorously at his pipe.

"Where did you meet her?" he asked.

"Here."

"Prudence Lynde here? Ah, I see; at the Inn. And so you've met her and fallen in love, Miles. Well, well!"

He stuffed the ashes down into his bowl with a pudgy forefinger. "She is still here?"

"No, she left this morning. That note was from her."

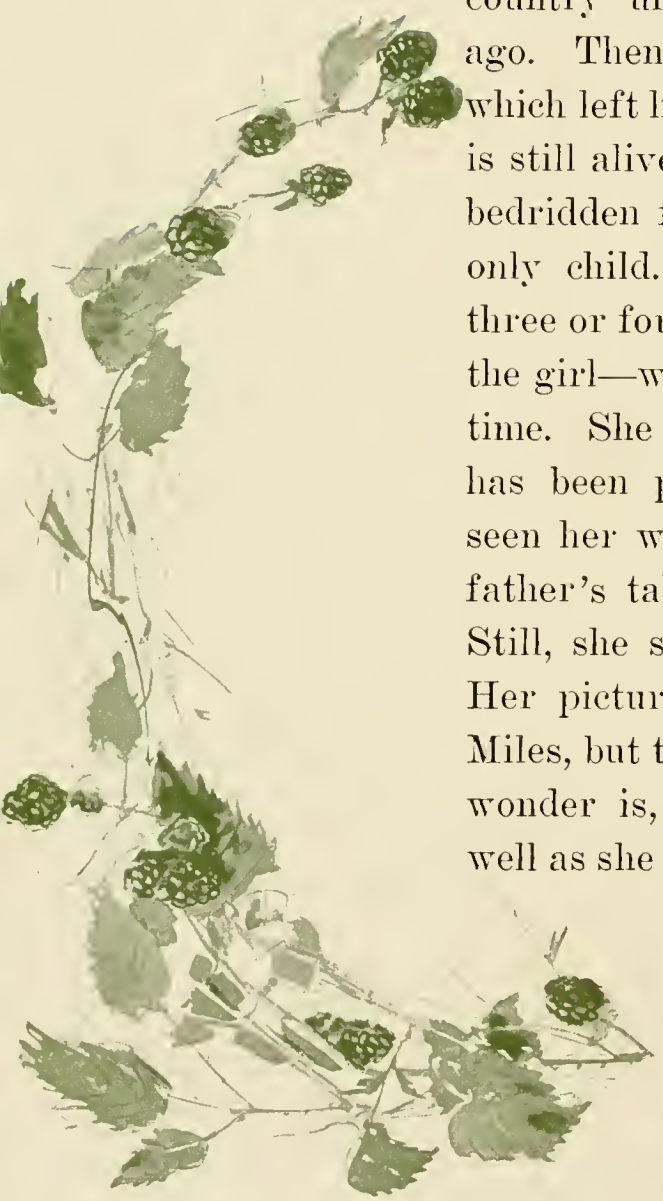
"She—refused you?"

"I never asked her. And the note practically informs me that I may just as well save myself the trouble."

"Well, well!" said Hunter again, sympathetically. "Er—isn't there any more to tell, old chap?"

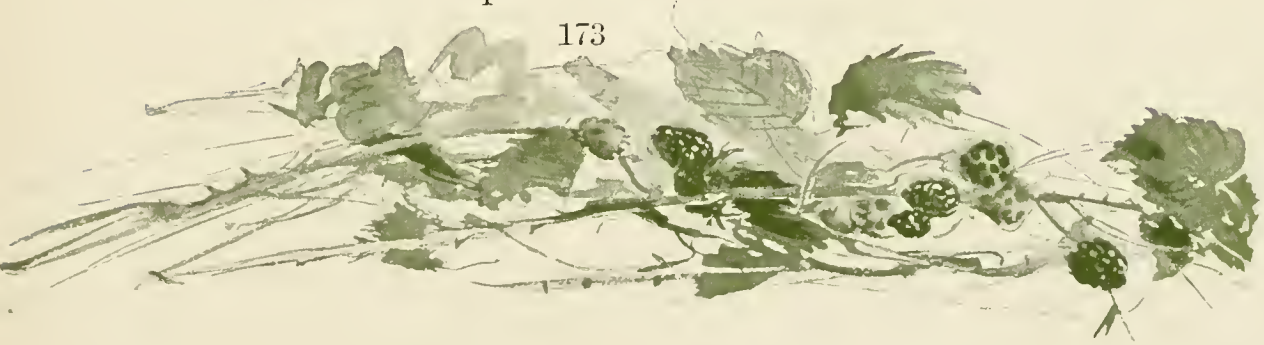
"I suppose there is; but what's the use? Do you recollect telling me awhile ago that what I needed was to singe my wings? Well, I've done it, Hunter. The effect may be educational, but it's damned unpleasant!"

"I'm sorry," growled his friend. He set himself on the other end of the window-seat and puffed silently a moment. Then,—



"Prudence Lynde is the daughter of Fergus Lynde," he said. "You probably don't recall him; he was a bit before your time. He was one of the foremost landscape painters in this country until perhaps fifteen years ago. Then he had a paralytic shock, which left him absolutely helpless. He is still alive, but I believe he has been bedridden for years. Prudence is an only child. Her mother died—well, three or four years ago. She—I mean the girl—was studying in Paris at the time. She came home, and since then has been painting landscapes. I've seen her work; she has some of her father's talent, but not—not enough. Still, she sells, I believe, fairly well. Her pictures have the right feeling, Miles, but they're a little—weak. The wonder is, though, that she does as well as she does, for she has her father

to look after, and a bedridden man must be a terrible burden. He can't even feed himself, they say. A terrible fate, that! I have one of his canvases in town. Perhaps you recall it; over the mantel in the big room; a small thing; a hill-side with a storm just passing over and the sun breaking through a piled-up mass of ragged clouds? No? A wonderful bit! And worth a lot of money. He wasn't prolific, and there aren't many of his pictures to be found. The Metropolitan has three, I think, and there are perhaps half a dozen more in this country in private collections. When he had his trouble a number of canvases, most of them unfinished things and sketches, were sold at Buell's Galleries for his benefit. I got mine there. Things went pretty well, for we wanted to help him out."



"And she looks after him, alone?" asked Miles.

"Except when she gets off for a week or two now and then, as she did this time. Then she has an attendant come in. I don't suppose there's much money. Probably she makes all they have. A very attractive girl I thought her. She was popular, too, at the classes; they called her—what was it? Ah, yes, the Princess."

"The Princess!" muttered Miles.

"Yes, she had a way about her. . . . And then her hair, you know! The Princess, yes, that was it. She was with me only one winter. Then she went to Paris; I gave her letters. I think she was doing very well there when her mother died and, of course, she had to return. I haven't seen her for a year or two, I think. She's as—as beautiful as ever, Miles?"

"Yes," answered the other, grimly. "I think she must be."

"I don't blame you, then; 'pon my soul I don't! She was only about eighteen when she came to me, but she had every boy there on his knees to her, I fancy!"

"And did she—was she——?"

"Not that I know of; she seemed too busy for affairs, I think." There was silence for a moment. "And this note, Miles?"

Miles took it from his pocket and tossed it along the seat.

"Read it," he said. Hunter did so, scowling and puffing thick clouds of smoke from under his ragged moustache. When he had finished he returned the paper to its envelope thoughtfully.

"Well, she used to be a girl who knew her own mind, old chap," he

said, finally. "But, just the same, I wouldn't give up hope. There's something queer about that note; it doesn't sound quite—quite conclusive."

"It does to me," laughed Miles, bitterly.

"You let her know—she understood that you—cared for her?"

"She must have known, although—oh, hang it, Hunter, I acted like forty kinds of a jackass! I don't know what she thought!"

"How often did you see her?"

"Almost every day for a week; I—I haunted her!"

"Then I guess she had an inkling," said Hunter, sagely. "Women generally know pretty early in the game. How did she treat you, Miles?"

"She was—she treated me better than I deserved. I behaved like a

clown! Sometimes I thought—she might care—in time."

"Well, don't give up now, man. When you see her again——"

"That's just what I shan't do, don't you see? She asks me not to try."

"We-ell," said Hunter. "Maybe. But——"

"And you've just told me that she's a girl who knows her own mind!"

"Yes, but no woman knows her own mind *all* the time," responded the other, oracularly. "Take the benefit of the doubt."

"I can't. Oh, there's no use trying to deceive myself. It's as plain as daylight that she doesn't care for me. I think I bothered her a good deal; perhaps bored her! The one decent thing that's left me to do is to respect her wishes. Oh, there's no use grum-

bling, Hunter; I dare say I can take my medicine with a grin—after a day or so. But just now''—he shook his head bewilderedly—''just now I'm all in a heap. The whole thing—seeing her—falling in love—and this note—has been so darned sudden! I feel—well, I sort of feel as though I had been bucked from a broncho and had come down hard!''

''Sorry, Miles,'' grunted Hunter. ''And of course there's nothing I can say.''

''No, I guess not, thanks, old chap.''

''Except to tell you to take it as decently as you can and not to lose hope altogether. Women are plaguey uncertain, Miles; you can't tell; I've seen queer things in my time.''

Miles gave a shake to his shoulders and stood up.

''For a bachelor, Hunter,'' he said,

with a smile, "you're too knowing."

"Think so?" responded the artist. "Did you ever see a horse-race?"

"Yes."

"Well, which do you think had the better view, you or the horses?"

XI

Miles shook the dust of Maple Green from his shoes two days later. Hunter and Bistre accompanied him to the station in the Inn carryall and said good-by on the platform. Bistre was wise, and from the moment Miles had started to throw things into the big yellow bag he had scented a parting. And he had haunted his friend like a shadow from that moment to the last, his brown eyes watching every movement and his stump of a tail wagging on the slightest provocation.

"I'm mighty sorry to be leaving you, old fellow," Miles confided to

him. "You see, Bistre, you were there every time; you saw her, just as I did; she scratched your head for you, too. Yes, and once she kissed you right here on this ugly old spot of yours, just as I'm doing, Bistre. Oh, hang it all, Bistre! The world's gone plumb wrong, hasn't it? It's taken the Princess away, *our* Princess, Bistre; I don't mind sharing her with you, old chap; I think you liked her pretty well, too, didn't you? Do you remember her eyes, Bistre? And those little red lips? I wonder—I wonder, if she knew you and I were feeling so rotten bad, whether she wouldn't be just a little bit sorry for us! You'll probably see her some time, you and your master. If you do, Bistre, you make her remember me. Do you hear?" he demanded, in a fierce whisper. "Make her remember

me, Bistre. Tell her I loved her—loved her! Tell her—— No, don't tell her anything, old fellow. Or—well, if she should ask, tell her I'm taking my medicine like a man. That's all you need tell her. And now, for heaven's sake, stop looking so woe-begone! Buck up, you sentimental old rascal!"

"Try and come down for a week or so in the fall if you're still around here," said Hunter, as they shook hands. "And don't forget that you're to come to my place when you're in the city. I'll write to you along in September, if I don't see you, and we'll arrange for that trip. I want to see some of those cobalt skies you yarn about, and the pink mesas, and all the other impossibly colored things down there. Good-by! Get down, Bistre!"

Miles tarried in the city just short

of a fortnight. Once or twice during that time he almost broke his resolution. Passing along the Avenue he frequently stopped at one of the cross streets to look wistfully along its sun-smitten pavements. Once, late at night, he turned into the forbidden thoroughfare and had approached within a block of her house before he pulled himself up. Then, after a hard struggle, he turned back.

"There's to be no compromise," he told himself, sternly. "Either you're going to keep to the letter of the law or you're going to turn traitor; and if you do that you don't deserve Christian burial!"

But always there was the unacknowledged hope that some day—on the street, in a store or a car—he would meet her. But he never did. And when June came he was trudging

about the Canadian Northwest with a pack on his shoulders.

In September he was back in New York, a little thinner, a little more tanned, a little more resigned. He didn't run out to Maple Green, however; the scar was not yet healed enough for that. But Hunter came to town for a day and a night, and the old studio on Eighth Street showed lights in its windows until long after midnight. There was much to talk of. Miles had seen some things worth the telling, and Hunter had the quiet happenings of Maple Green to relate.

"What are you going to do now?" asked the artist, when the talk lagged.

"I'm off to Colorado in a day or two," was the answer. "I'm going to stop with a chap in Denver for a week or two. Then it's Peterson's Ranch and hard work for awhile. The pub-

lishers, like the chap in Dickens, are crying for more. Well, I've got more, heaps more; good stuff, too. And I'm ready to go back to work, too. Lord, man, but there's nothing finer in life than having work to do and wanting to do it! Eh? Isn't that so? How's Bistre?"

"Fat and lazy. I wrote you that he went into mourning for a week or so after you left, didn't I? Why, he wouldn't eat more than twice enough for him! I never saw him so grumpy! And he used to go sniffing around the room, and then walk to the door and out into the road, and look up and down, for all the world as though he were searching for you!"

"I dare say he was, dear old dog! Bring him with you when you come West, will you? He'll have the time of his innocent young life out there.

And you'll be along in October, you say? That's good. I'll meet you at Galveston, if you're coming by steamer, so you won't get lost. And I'll give you a good time, old chap. By the way, have you—have you heard anything of Miss Lynde lately?''

''Not a thing. I suppose she's in town here. You—you've never seen her?''

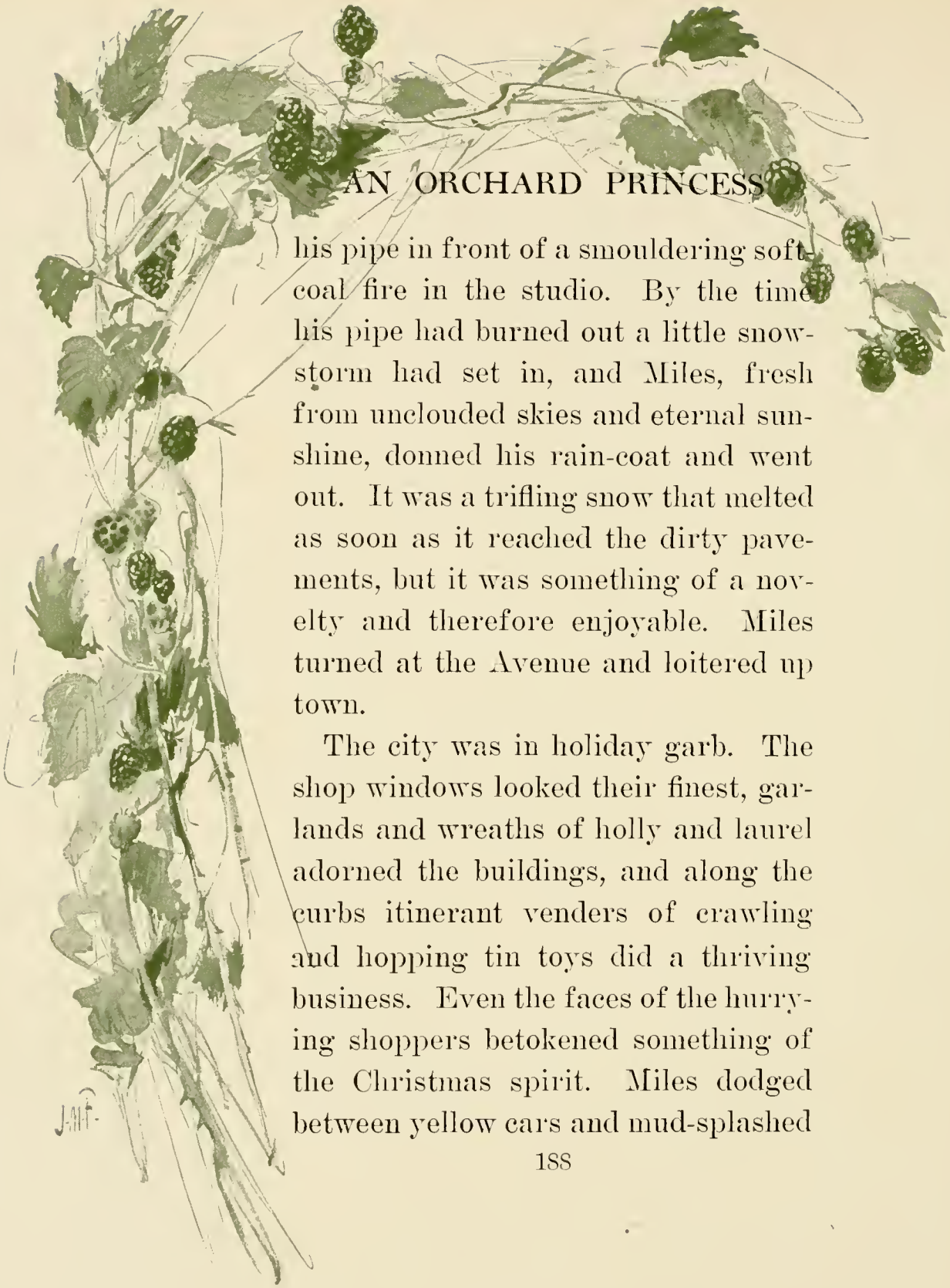
''No, I've never seen her,'' answered Miles, gravely.

''Hum; I thought maybe you'd change your mind, Miles.''

''No. . . . Well, shall we turn in?''

XII

Miles returned from the West three days before Christmas, alighting at the Grand Central Station at the beginning of a dull, muggy afternoon. He had himself conveyed, bag and baggage, to Hunter Brough's apartment. The artist, he was informed, was out of town for the day, but would be back in time for dinner, and had left word that Mr. Fallon was to take possession of his usual room and make himself at home. This Miles proceeded to do. After a bath, to eradicate the grime of a four days' railway journey, he unpacked his trunk, dressed, and then settled down with



his pipe in front of a smouldering soft-coal fire in the studio. By the time his pipe had burned out a little snow-storm had set in, and Miles, fresh from unclouded skies and eternal sunshine, donned his rain-coat and went out. It was a trifling snow that melted as soon as it reached the dirty pavements, but it was something of a novelty and therefore enjoyable. Miles turned at the Avenue and loitered up town.

The city was in holiday garb. The shop windows looked their finest, garlands and wreaths of holly and laurel adorned the buildings, and along the curbs itinerant venders of crawling and hopping tin toys did a thriving business. Even the faces of the hurrying shoppers betokened something of the Christmas spirit. Miles dodged between yellow cars and mud-splashed

hansoms and, reaching the farther end of Madison Square, went on up the Avenue. At the crossings the arc lights were springing into life, purple in the twilight, spluttering and protesting. One by one the windows along the way became radiant. At a jeweller's Miles stopped to purchase a scarf-pin for Hunter. Coming out again, he paused to button his coat against the wet flakes, and his gaze, wandering to the next window, fixed itself upon an object that sent his heart jumping about inside of him as absurdly as one of the ridiculous tin toys. Striding to the window, he pressed his nose against the wet glass.

The shop was a picture dealer's, and the window, aglow with yellow light, held half a dozen framed canvases. Upon one of them Miles gazed eagerly, and the darkening street vanished,

and he was once more under the apple-trees with the Princess. Before him was the glade, agleam with sunlight, fresh with the tender green of spring. The tiny brook, almost hidden by the lush grass and clumps of forget-me-nots, wandered away toward the road, and the blossom-laden trees narrowed toward it. Beyond was a blur of distant hills, and above was a radiant blue sky with a single fluffy cloud afloat upon it. December vanished. It was April once more. He could hear the trickling music of the sun-flecked stream, the trilling of the birds, and the droning of the bees. Then his eyes fell to a little tablet set at the bottom of the frame, and through the blurred glass he read:

"The April joy of the blossoming world,
And the charm of April days."

He didn't need the signature in the lower corner of the canvas to tell him the artist's name; that "P. Lynde" was quite superfluous. An instant later he was inside, facing a dignified, frock-coated salesman.

"I want to ask the price of that picture in the window, the one by Miss Lynde," he announced.

The salesman refreshed his memory by a glance at the object in question.

"Fifty dollars, sir," he replied. "A charming thing; quite one of the best I have seen by the artist; a typical example of her finest work."

"Fifty dollars?" repeated Miles. "You—er—you don't think she would take more?"

"*More?*" exclaimed the salesman. "You mean less?"

"No, I mean more," said Miles, firmly.

"Why, I—I suppose we are empowered to get the highest price possible for the picture," replied the other, viewing Miles narrowly. "Fifty dollars is an extremely low figure to place on a picture of that sort, and——"

"Exactly!" said Miles, eagerly. "My own idea! I thought that possibly seventy-five—or eighty——?"

"Suppose you place your own figure," suggested the salesman. "Let me bring the picture where you can see it. There! Now, I call that a remarkable piece of work, sir. Observe the lighting, sir. Splendid, isn't it?"

"Splendid," answered Miles, warmly. "I—er—I forgot to say that if I bought the picture I should want to have it now."

"We can deliver it this evening, sir, to any address in the city."

"I won't trouble you; I'll just take it with me."

"Certainly, sir; and the price? You said eighty, I think?"

"One hundred, I believe, was it not?"

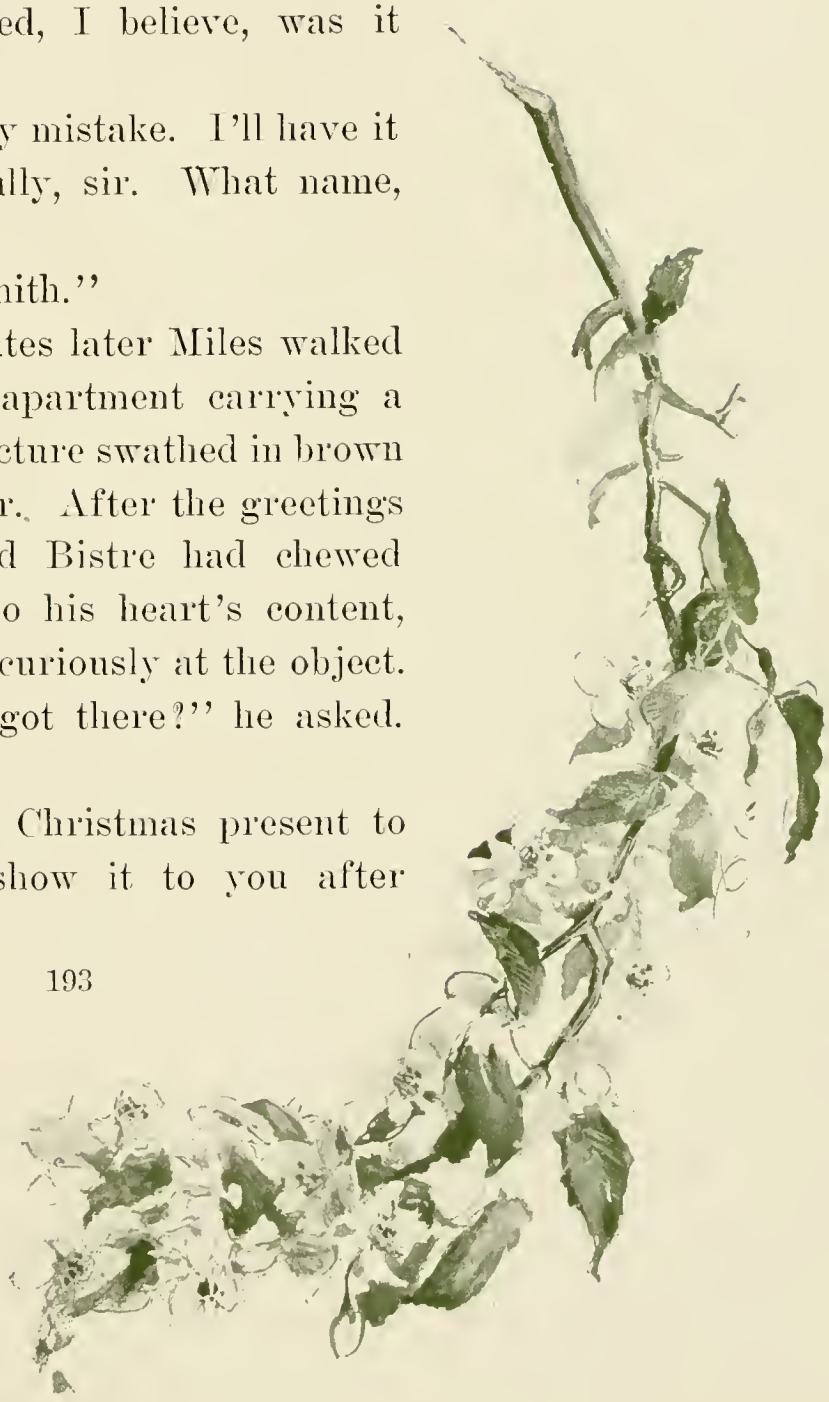
"Yes, yes; my mistake. I'll have it done up carefully, sir. What name, please?"

"Er—Mr. Smith."

Twenty minutes later Miles walked into Hunter's apartment carrying a three-by-two picture swathed in brown wrapping paper. After the greetings were over, and Bistre had chewed Miles's hand to his heart's content, Hunter looked curiously at the object.

"What you got there?" he asked. "A picture?"

"Yes, it's a Christmas present to myself. I'll show it to you after dinner."



And after dinner the paper was tenderly removed and Miles set the picture on a chair for his friend's inspection.

"I don't want any criticisms," he warned. "I bought that because I liked it, and I don't give a continental hang if the drawing's wrong, or the arrangement out of plumb, or the colors garish, or—or anything."

"All right, my lad; I won't criticise. All I've got to say is, that it's the best thing I ever knew her to do; and if she can do that sort of thing right along she'll make a name for herself. Where'd you pick it up?"

"Blamed if I know; some shop above Madison Square, on the Avenue."

"I suppose you know the scene?"

"Yes, I—I was there."

"Ah!" said Hunter. "And that re-

minds me. We're going out to the Green to-morrow to stay over Christmas? Do you mind?''

''No, I think not. But what's the idea?''

''Oh, just a notion. I thought it would be rather jolly to spend the day out of town; New York's so sickeningly ugly and dull on Christmas. I went out there to-day and got things ready. And I've persuaded the Ruggleses and Horace Taft and his wife to go out, too. So we'll have quite a cosey party at dinner.'' He turned to the mantel and began to fill his pipe from the old earthen jar. ''The Ruggleses are going to bring a friend along, too.''

''All right,'' said Miles, absently, his eyes on the picture. ''More the merrier, I suppose.''

''Well, that's what I thought,'' an-

swered Hunter, stealing a glance at him. "By the way, Miles, I suppose you've got over that—that trouble of yours by this time?"

"Trouble?" asked Miles.

"I mean—Miss Lynde."

"Oh," said Miles. "Well, I shan't moon around the premises like a love-sick school-boy, if that is what you mean. As for getting over it—— No, I don't think I have, Hunter. I've come to realize, however, that a fellow can't have everything he wants in this world."

"That's true," grunted the artist.

"But I haven't got through wanting," added the other, softly. "I don't honestly think I ever shall."

There was silence for a moment. Then,—

"Have you heard about her father?" Hunter asked.

"Her father? No, what?"

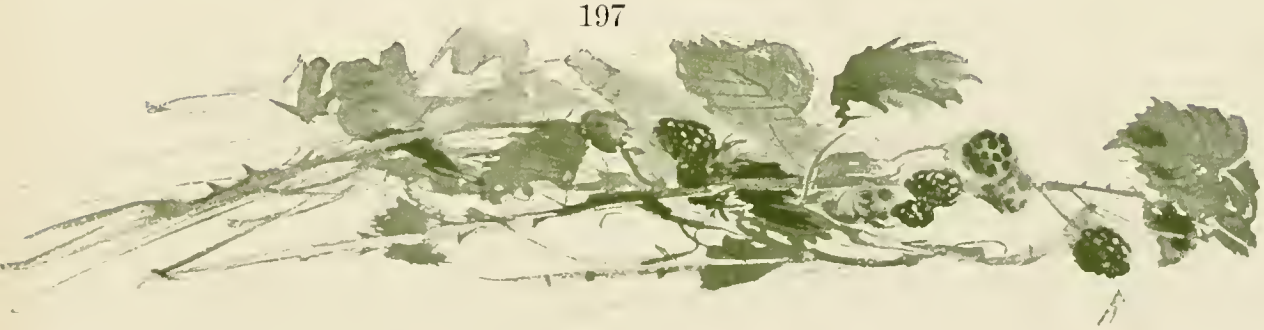
"He's dead; died in October. I heard of it when I returned from your place. Quite a lot of us old-timers attended. Well, I guess he was glad enough, poor chap; I dare say he had been praying for it for years."

"And—Miss Lynde?" asked Miles, thoughtfully.

"She's still here; lives at the same place, Miss Anamite told me; working harder than ever, I suppose. Do you know, old chap, I've been wondering whether"—he paused to push the tobacco down in the bowl—"whether that didn't have something to do with it."

"What?"

"Well, whether she might not have treated you differently if she hadn't had her father to look after. It's just an idea."



Miles considered the proposition silently. Then,—

"I wish I could think so," he answered, "but—no, I don't believe it was that."

"Well, anyway, if you see her again it might be well to—ah—find out."

"Thanks," answered Miles, noncommittingly.

"By the way," said the artist, presently, "I've got my copy of the new novel; much obliged. I haven't had time to look into it yet. What's it about?"

"Oh, the usual things," answered the other.

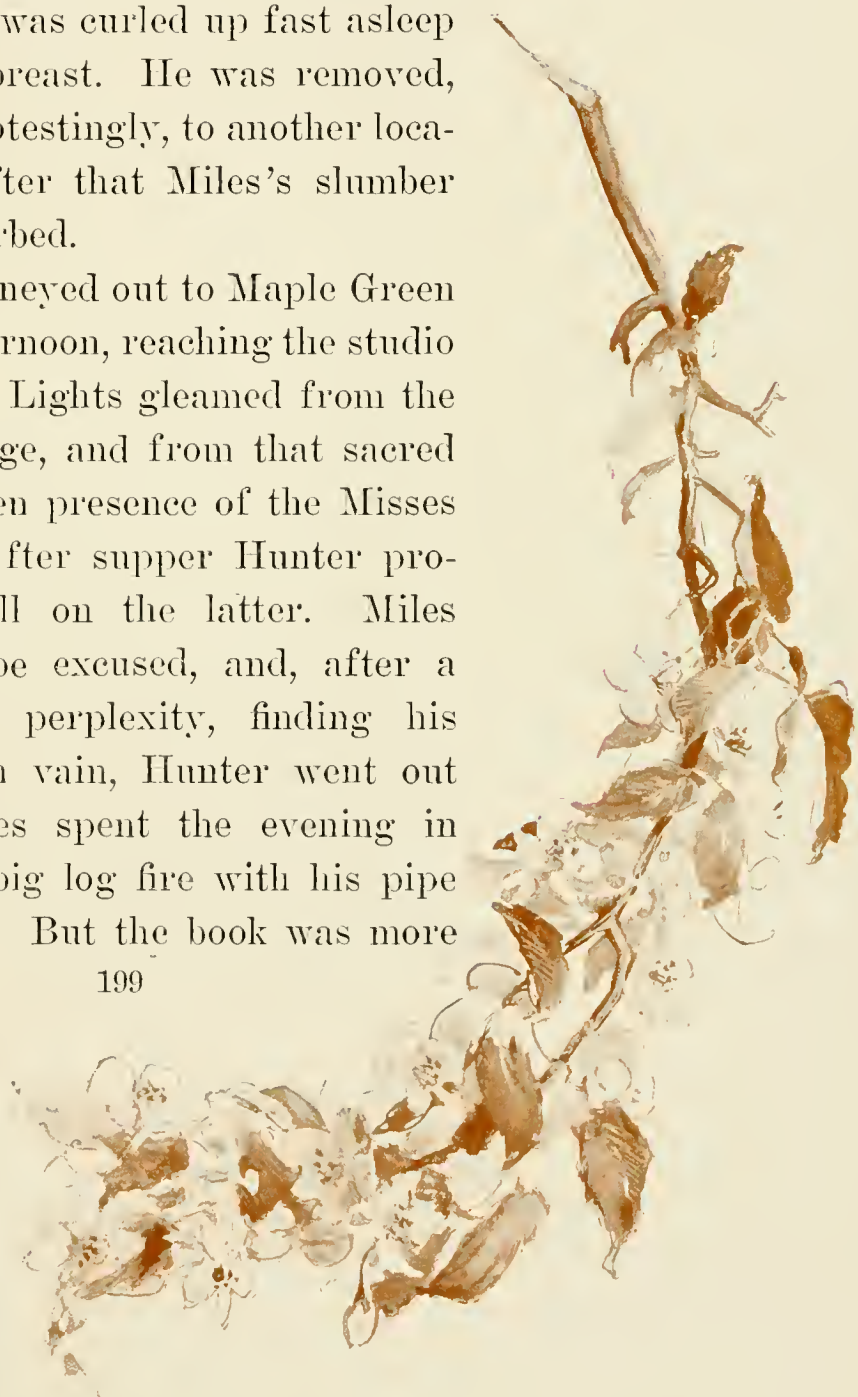
"Must be selling pretty well, from what I hear?"

"Remarkably well, yes. I wish to heaven I cared!"

Miles was afflicted with terrible dreams that night, which finally left

him wide-awake in a tremor of fright, and with a terrible feeling of oppression in his chest. Investigation soon discovered the cause in the shape of Bistre, who was curled up fast asleep on Miles's breast. He was removed, grunting protestingly, to another location, and after that Miles's slumber was undisturbed.

They journeyed out to Maple Green the next afternoon, reaching the studio after dark. Lights gleamed from the Tafts' cottage, and from that sacred to the maiden presence of the Misses Ruggles. After supper Hunter proposed a call on the latter. Miles begged to be excused, and, after a moment of perplexity, finding his pleadings in vain, Hunter went out alone. Miles spent the evening in front of a big log fire with his pipe and a book. But the book was more



frequently on his knees than in his hands. Hunter came back at nine and the two went early to bed, the artist to fall instantly into loud slumber, Miles to lie long with his wide-open eyes fixed on the clear winter sky, in which a big white moon sailed gloriously.

After breakfast was over in the morning, the two set about decorating the house. Piles of evergreen had been gathered by Hunter's orders, and now they were dragged inside and heaped lavishly wherever space allowed. In the midst of the work Hunter leaped suddenly from the chair upon which he had stood precariously winding evergreen above a picture, and hurried to the front window. Then he carelessly went to the door, opened it, and looked out.

"By Jupiter, Miles, but this is a great morning!" he exclaimed.

"Fine," answered Miles, tacking sprays above the long window.

"Yes, but you don't realize how fine it is," said the other, impatiently. "Come here and have a taste of this air."

"I'm not hungry," was the reply. Nevertheless, he stepped down and crossed to the door.

"Look at the sunlight on those fields!" said Hunter, enthusiastically. "And look at that sky!"

"All right," answered Miles. "Very nice sunlight, very satisfactory sky. It seems to be blue to-day; quite a surprise, isn't it? I don't blame you for being startled, old chap; blue skies aren't so common around this part of the world that——"

"Look up the road there, too," interrupted the other. "See the way the light falls between those cedars."

"Hum, yes, nice effect; but don't you think we'd better get on with——"

Miles stopped short. There was something else besides light between the cedars. A girl in a black dress was moving slowly away up the road. The blood rushed into Miles's face, receded, and left it white as the little snow-bank beside the stoop. He turned with startled eyes on Hunter.

"Miss Lynde!" he whispered.

"It does look like her," answered the other, calmly.

"But—what's she doing here?"

"Visiting the Ruggleses. Didn't I tell you they had a guest?"

"This is your doing, Hunter!"

"What of it, you idiot? Get your hat!"

"What do you mean?" asked Miles, breathlessly.

"I mean you're wasting a lot of valuable time stopping here to ask questions. Don't be a fool, Miles Fallon!"

Miles looked from the artist to the black speck up the road. Then he looked back again. Then he dashed into the house. Then he dashed out.

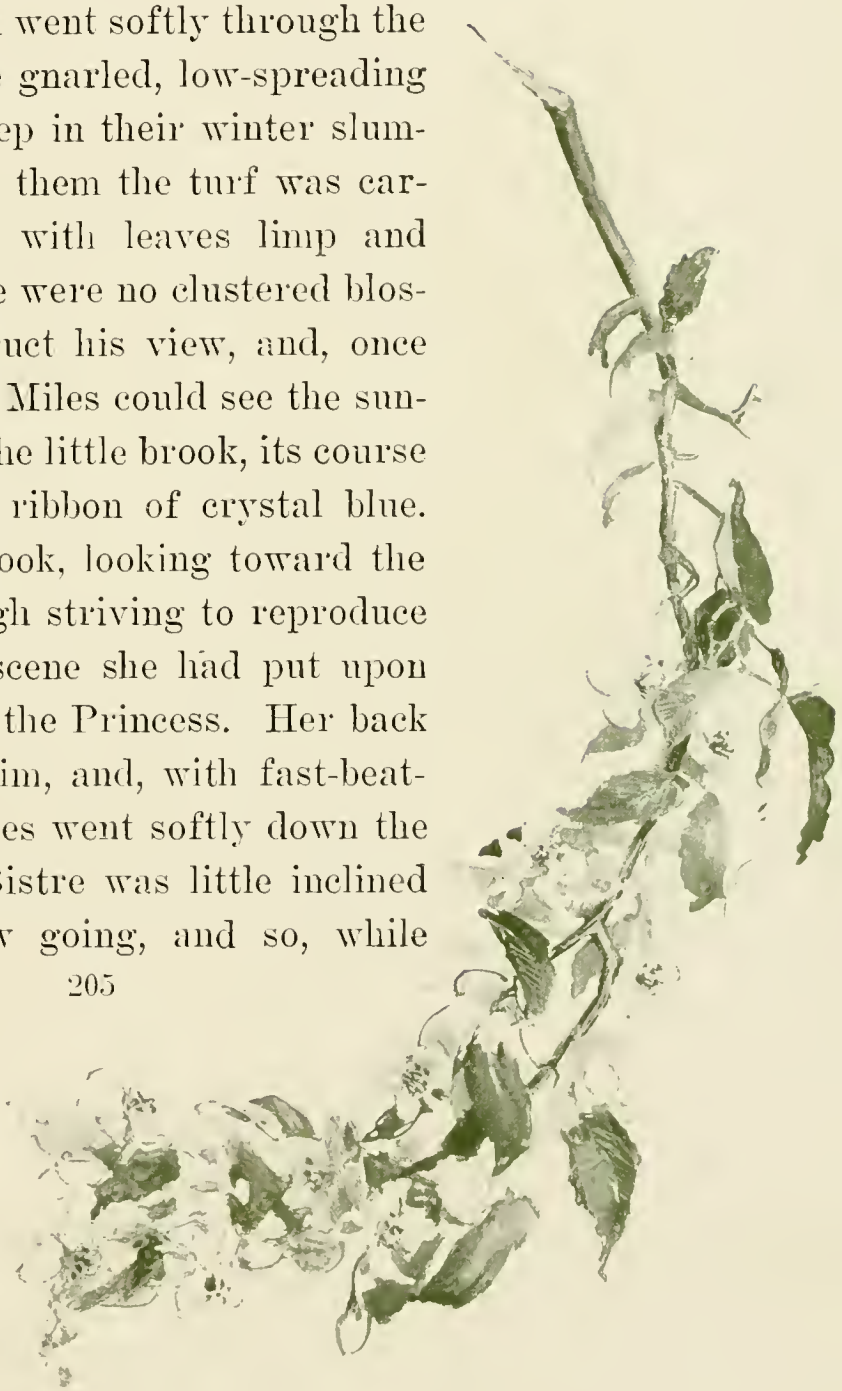
So did Bistre.

XIII

The earth rang underfoot like metal, but overhead was an April sky, a sky as deep a blue as ever arched over Venice. Not a cloud flecked it. The sunlight bathed the brown fields and russet meadows with plate of gold and sprinkled the furrows with diamonds where the frost-crystals lay. The air was at once mellow and pungent, like old wine newly spiced. Here and there, along the shadowed lees of banks or 'neath the tangles of wayside bushes, lay little drifts of snow, winter's seals of possession. The maples across the ravine were stark and silent, but along the borders of the fields sentinel cedars stood erect and watchful in green uniforms. On southern slopes the grass still held its summer hue, and against the warm gray bole of a withered beech a tiny woodpecker beat a cheerful tattoo. It

was as though Nature had found a day mislaid from Indian summer and had frugally tucked it into December.

Miles climbed the breach in the stone wall and went softly through the orchard. The gnarled, low-spreading trees were deep in their winter slumber. Beneath them the turf was carpeted thickly with leaves limp and brown. There were no clustered blossoms to obstruct his view, and, once over the wall, Miles could see the sunlit glade and the little brook, its course marked by a ribbon of crystal blue. Beside the brook, looking toward the road, as though striving to reproduce in mind the scene she had put upon canvas, stood the Princess. Her back was toward him, and, with fast-beating heart, Miles went softly down the slope. But Bistre was little inclined for such slow going, and so, while



Miles was still a dozen paces distant, he broke the spell of the girl's thoughts by a frantic, ecstatic leap against her skirt. She turned, startled, and, with just a glance for Bistre, looked toward Miles. He saw the color flood her cheeks, and, in spite of his own blissful confusion of mind and senses, noted the smile that leaped into her eyes. She stood with outstretched hand, blue-eyed, golden-haired, radiant-cheeked, while he covered swiftly the space between them. His heart and eyes had hungered for her during half a year; he was mazed with the happiness that surged through him; his hand ached for the touch of hers; and so, having reached her, he clasped the gloved fingers in his for just a moment, and,—

"How do you do?" he asked, politely.

Even Bistre saw the humor of it and grinned broadly, with hanging tongue.

"How do you do, Mr. Fallon?" responded Prudence. Then they looked at each other, smilingly, for a breathless instant, and perhaps something in the steady, eager gaze of his eyes moved her to hurried words. "I—I had no idea you were here!" she said.

"And I didn't know you were here," he answered, "until a few moments ago. You are stopping with the Ruggleses?"

"Yes; and you, of course, are with Mr. Brough?"

"Yes."

Again there was a little silence. The color which had faded from her cheeks crept back.

"He said nothing of it last night," she said, perplexed.

"No, neither did he mention your presence to me," responded Miles, meaningly. "It—it has every look of a conspiracy, don't you think?"

Her eyes dropped and a tiny smile flickered about her lips.

"Miss Anamite has been acting very mysteriously," she answered. "I think now I understand."

"Oh, there's no doubt but what we've been made the victims of a deep-laid conspiracy," he declared, cheerfully, watching her face. "And I am a very happy victim."

"It's nice of you to take it so well," she murmured. She turned and gazed about her. "It doesn't look much as it did when we saw it last, does it?" she asked, lightly.

"No, very little as it did when I saw it last," he answered, meaningly. "I spent a morning here waiting for you;

and you didn't come. It was a very empty place that day."

"But you got on better with your picture, perhaps," she laughed, "without disturbance."

"No, I decided not to paint that picture. And it is just as well, for I've found one since then that serves much better."

"Yes?" she said, questioningly. But he did not enlighten her. Instead, with a glance at her sombre gown and a lowering of his voice, he said,—

"You've had a great misfortune since then, Hunter tells me. I am very sorry, Miss Lynde."

"Thank you," she answered, softly. "But my father's death was not so painful to me as it would have been had he wanted to live. Mr. Brough told you about him? It was a welcome relief to him, and for his sake I try to

be glad. But I have missed him terribly; we were together almost every moment."

"I can understand that," said Miles, gravely. "I fancy you have been very lonely." He paused. "I wish I might have seen him once," he said, regretfully.

"He saw very few persons," she answered. "He was very patient through it all, but—I think he tried always to forget."

She began to move away toward the road.

"You are not going so soon?" he asked. "Won't you stay a little longer? It is very early; look at the shadows."

"If you wish," she answered. "I have nothing to do all day long; they won't let me paint."

"They're quite right," he said, de-

cidedly. "You've been working too hard, I'm sure; you don't look as well as you did in the spring."

"Don't I?" she asked, with a smile. "But I feel quite well."

"I think it's remorse," he said, with a shake of his head.

"Remorse?" she questioned.

"Yes; I—I got your note."

"My note? Yes, I supposed you had," she said, looking away.

"And I did as you asked me," he went on, softly. "I never sought you, although it was the hardest task I ever set myself. I almost kicked over the traces once, Prudence."

She cast a little startled glance at him and swayed as though about to take flight. He put his hand gently on her arm and she stood still, her eyes on the ground.

"Why did you do it?" he asked.

"Why did you write that note? Did you think I would follow you?"

"Please!" she whispered.

"Did you, Prudence? For if you did, you thought rightly. I would have found you sooner or later, you know. Tell me, please; why did you write it?"

For a long moment she made no answer. Then, slowly, she raised her face until her eyes were on his.

"I wrote it because," she began, bravely, "because——" Then the lashes fell over the blue eyes. "But what can it matter," she faltered, "why I wrote it?"

"I would like to know," he answered, gravely. "You see, it wasn't as though I was just the acquaintance you called me, 'one of the few acquaintances,' Prudence. You must have known that! It mattered to me,

a whole lot, dear, and it still matters. You can't make a man suffer as you made me suffer without its mattering. Why did you write it?"

"Oh, please!" she said, quickly, with a swift, beseeching glance. "I didn't mean you to suffer! I didn't think you—cared—so much!"

"Cared! Why, I loved you, dear! Do you know what that means? That I thought of you day in and day out, and longed for just a glimpse of you as a thirsty man longs for water! That I'd have given anything in the world for just the chance to see you and touch you and hear you speak, for just the chance that is mine this moment! Cared! Is that caring?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" she cried. "That's caring! Don't you think I know? Don't you think I—I——!"

She stopped, breathlessly, her

cheeks warm with blushes, her red lips atremble, her eyes falling before his.

"Prudence!" he whispered, hoarsely. "Prudence! Think what you're saying, dear! Do you mean it? Do you, sweetheart?"

His arms closed about her until the bent head was against his shoulder. Bistre, observing from a yard away, yawned cynically. The slim shoulders quivered under the black jacket, and when, at last, the blue eyes found courage to raise themselves to his, little tears trembled within them. Bending slowly, he kissed them, and they closed under his lips. Then, while they were still closed and might not see, he bent yet lower.

The eyes opened and she struggled gently until she was very far away from him—oh, quite twelve inches! Then,—

"DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'VE DONE?" SHE ASKED

"Do you know what you've done?" she asked, with a little tremulous laugh.

"Done? I've kissed the Princess!" he answered, triumphantly. "I've kissed the woman I love better than all the world and all that the world has in it!"

She crept back to him until his arms were again close about her.

"Oh, yes, yes!" she sighed, happily. "Say it again—please!"

"That I love you?"

The head against his shoulder nodded shyly.

"I shan't," he answered, sternly, "until you have said it."

"Then listen!" she whispered. He listened, but for a moment the only sound he heard was the beating of his heart and the hollow gurgling of the little brook under its skim

of ice. Then, like a breath, it reached him,—

"I love you—Miles!"

"Say it again!" he cried, eagerly. She shook her head, laughing softly.

"It's your turn," she whispered.

"I fear I shall tire you," he answered, in simulated concern.

"No, you won't," she answered. "You see—— Oh, I've wanted to be loved so!" she cried, with a little catch in her voice. "I've been so—so lonely!"

Presently, but not until Bistre had yawned again twice, she was standing away from him, blushing, radiant, happy, her hands busy with her golden hair.

"And now I'll tell you why I wrote it," she said.

"Oh, I don't care now," he laughed, joyfully.

"But—but I want to! I wrote it because I was afraid!"

"Afraid? Afraid of what? Of me?"

"No, that is, not exactly. I was afraid you would make me love you, and—and I couldn't have—then." She paused, thoughtfully. "But I did!" she cried, exultingly.

"I don't understand!"

"Well, if you had—had said what you have said now, I might have—have——"

"I wish to heaven I had!" he groaned.

"But I couldn't have then, don't you see?" she went on, earnestly. "I couldn't have left father. There was no one else to look after him; he needed me every minute of his life. And I was afraid—afraid——!"

"But you might have told me, Pru-

dence! I wouldn't have asked you to leave him, dear. I could have helped you."

"I was afraid," she repeated, doubtfully. "I was afraid—of myself!"

"Do you know, dear," he asked, a little later, "that this is Christmas Day?"

"I had quite forgotten it!" she exclaimed, in surprise.

"And so had I," he answered. "But now, with my Christmas present in my arms, I can't very well help remembering. How do you like being a Christmas present?"

"I—I like it," she murmured. "Only—only I don't think I am very much of a one."

"The best man ever had, my Princess!" he answered, softly.

"Princess?" she asked. "Was that

the name you said you had for me—once?'' she asked, shyly.

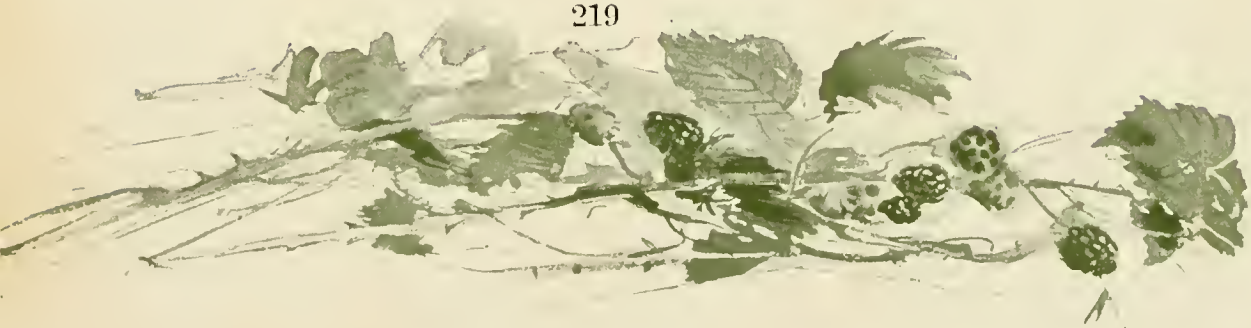
''Yes,'' he answered. ''That was the name I gave you the very first moment I saw you here among the apple blossoms with the sunlight on your hair.''

''Really?'' she asked, looking wonderingly into his face. Then, ''I don't think I could have looked much like a princess,'' she said, regretfully, ''with an old white dress on.''

''Ah, but you did,'' he answered, stoutly. ''The dearest, fairest, most beautiful princess in all the world; my Orchard Princess!''

Stooping, he kissed her smiling mouth. Then, side by side, with the little brook singing a happy pæan to their ears, they passed down the sunlit glade.

So did Bistre.



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